

*Routledge Advances in Feminist Peace Research*

# **GENDERING PEACE IN VIOLENT PERIPHERIES**

## **MARGINALITY, MASCULINITY, AND FEMINIST AGENCY**

Uddipana Goswami



# Gendering Peace in Violent Peripheries

This book forwards Assam (and Northeast India) as a specific location for studying operations of gendered power in multi-ethnic, conflict-habituated geopolitical peripheries globally.

In the shifting and relational margins of such peripheral societies, power and agency are constantly negotiated and in flux. Notions of masculinity are redefined in an interlaced environment of militarization, hyper-masculinization, and gendered violence. These interconnections inform victimhood and agency among the most vulnerable marginalized constituencies – namely, women and migrants. By centering the marginalized in its inquiry, the book analyzes obstacles to achieving positive, organic peace based on cooperation and mutual healing. The tools used to perpetuate an endless cycle of violence that makes conflict a habit – a way of life – are identified in order to enable resistance against them from within the margins. Such resistance must be based on reflexivity and strategic, cautious radicalism. This involves critically interrogating the inherent connections between engendered pasts and feminist futures, local changes and global contexts, as well as between small, incremental changes and big shifts impacting entire societies, nations, and global orders.

This book will be of much interest to students of ethnic conflict, conflict resolution, feminist peace, and Asian/South Asian politics.

**Uddipana Goswami** is a writer, feminist peace researcher, and author of *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam* (Routledge, 2014).

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Feminist Agency

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**For my son, Raag,  
because  
his generation will build a feminist future**



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## About the Author

**Uddipana Goswami** is a writer and feminist peace researcher with a PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. She is author of six books, including an academic monograph, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam* (Routledge, 2014), and a collection of short stories set against the violent conflicts of Northeast India, *No Ghosts in This City* (Zubaan, 2014). Her Fulbright postdoctoral research (2016–2018) at the University of Pennsylvania, USA, was on gender and ethnonationalist conflicts.

A former journalist and editor, Uddipana worked with several multi-national and hyperlocal media groups, from National Geographic Channel to the *Seven Sisters Post*. As an academic, she teaches/has taught writing, peace, media, and gender studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (India), Guwahati College (India), University of Pennsylvania (USA), Curtis Institute of Music (USA), and the Johns Hopkins University (USA).

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# Introduction

## Engendering Peace

Existing feminist scholarship has established how social relationships based on hierarchies and mutually exclusive binaries that depend on a dichotomous understanding of the world, are gendered. What is more, they facilitate “the production and reproduction of violence” at multiple levels (Confortini, 2006, 333). Political conflicts between diverse communities living in a State – and those between the communities and the State itself – result from and create dichotomous relationships characterized by hierarchies of sub/super-ordination; structural inequalities and unequal access to power and resources; and violent responses. As such, they lend themselves to a gendered analysis. In this book, I propose to take a gendered look at horizontal conflicts between sub- and ethno-nationalist groups and concurrent vertical ones between these groups and the State. The aim is to explore how relationships of power – and hegemonies of masculinity, in particular – engage and negotiate with each other, collide with and co-opt each other, and finally mutate and regenerate in the course of political conflicts.

To this end, I will examine marginalized communities in conflict in geopolitical peripheries<sup>1</sup> of postcolonial Asian nation-states. Specifically, I will focus on the interconnections between patriarchal predominance, ethnic fragmentations, and postcolonial confrontations primarily in Assam. Assam is among the eight states in Northeast India (henceforth, the Northeast) which is one of the most sustained conflict zones in South Asia bordering East and Southeast Asia. Ethno- and sub-nationalist movements have opposed the inclusion of the region’s borderland communities in the Indian Union since before its formation in 1947. To this day, small and large ethnic and autochthonous communities continue to challenge the Indian mainland’s attempts at “nationalizing” space and identity in these borderlands where the three Asia’s meet. The resultant intractable conflicts are multilayered and multi-dimensional, offering a rich context for studying the interactions of power and patriarchy with diverse marginalized entities: gendered, geopolitical, and ethnic.

## Why Northeast India?

Assam – and Northeast India in general – is crucial to illustrating the book’s exploration of power in Asian geopolitical and gendered peripheries. Since this state is located at the heart of India’s gateway to the transborder region, finding peace here is crucial to finding peace in the borderlands of South, East, and Southeast Asia. The Northeast is geographically contiguous with China, Burma/Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan and shares an intricate ethnic, linguistic, material cultural, and traditional connection with the peoples there. Pre-colonial economic, political, and cultural influences were exchanged between the transborder peoples via “the Southwest Silk Road and related passages running from Yunnan to Assam and Manipur via Eastern Tibet and Burma and regional river systems that cut through the mountainous terrain of the Eastern Himalayas” (Bender, 2012, 108). Though colonial history and administrative exigencies created arbitrary borders between them, ethnic affinity between the peoples still exists (Pau, 2018). This affinity – bolstered by the material remnants and collective memories of pre-colonial connections – have the potential to promote either peace or instability in the region.

By rethinking security approaches and reimagining the relations between the peoples, it is possible to bring stability to this tumultuous transborder region where Southeast Asia’s “arc of instability”<sup>2</sup> really begins. However, since the principal powers of the region – ensconced in the heartlands – have failed to recognize/optimize the strategic significance of their respective peripheries, they remain zones of political turmoil and discontent, posing a constant challenge to the idea of the modern nation-state while keeping the entire region in turmoil. It is thus that the pre-colonial routes and ethnic linkages were revived and utilized by the insurgent groups of Northeast India to find political refuge and military training in the neighboring countries (Bhaumik, 2009, 153–181). In Chapter 1, I go into deeper details regarding the relevance of Assam and the Northeast to this discussion.

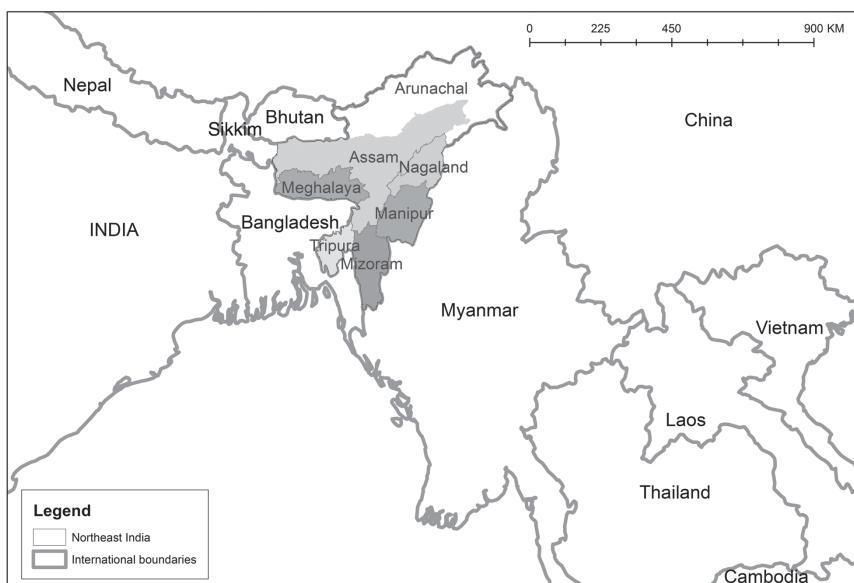
Studying the shifting trajectory of the multidimensional conflicts in this part of India also reveals the need to reframe existing gender-blind approaches to conflict transformation. For instance, many of the borderland communities – some of them spread across borders – in the Northeast and its neighborhood, are ethnic minorities in their respective nation-states today. The Dai (Tai), Wa (Va), Jingpo (Kachin), and Chin (Kuki) of Northeast India, Burma, and China (Bender, 2017, 7) – to name a few – were pre-colonial communities that lived or moved around in these parts before being fractured and marginalized by (or arbitrarily divided between) the modern, postcolonial nation-states that emerged in the late 1940s. Within these States, “discourses of hierarchy” that are concerned with modernity and progress at the cost of “authenticity” (S.D. White, 1997, 303) informed their marginalization and subjected them to various forms of violence. Studying the transitions and transformations that such patriarchal violences have caused, and situating them in the

current contexts of globalization, modern ideologies of developmentalism, and environmental transitions is essential for ensuring a humane, dignified, and peaceful future.

In exploring pathways to such a future in Assam, I look at how its vulnerable constituencies – particularly women and migrant communities – are engaging with other marginalized entities and the patriarchies of power. And I argue that global communities in intractable conflict can learn from these vulnerable and marginalized constituencies who are making positive peace through powerful, yet non-confrontational, ways that redefine gendered relationships.

### **Assam and Northeast India**

Assam is located at the heart of the 262,230-square-kilometer northeastern region that comprises roughly 8 percent of the land area of the Indian territory. It is connected to the rest of the country through a 21 km-wide stretch of land known as the Chicken's Neck Corridor. Of the eight Northeast states, Sikkim is the only one that is not geographically contiguous with the rest of the Northeast. It was annexed to India as recently as 1975 and brought under India's Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DONER) in 2002.<sup>3</sup> It does not share the same intertwined ethnic and political history as



*Map 1* Northeast India in East, Southeast, and South Asia

Source: Sarat Phukan, Gauhati University

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the rest of the region. This book will, therefore, focus largely on the rest of the seven states of the Northeast that have shared an intricate geopolitical history since the British colonizers started bringing them together under a common administrative system following the start of their rule here in 1826. These seven states are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura.

Before the British arrived, there was no common political authority in Assam. Instead, the political landscape was marked by the rise and wane of a few major dynasties and the rules of local chieftains and minor kings in different parts of the Brahmaputra Valley in the north, the Barak Valley in the south, and the south-central hills (Gait, 1906; Barpujari, 2003–2004). The Burmese invaded Assam in 1817 following internal dissensions in the Ahom Kingdom, which had ruled over large parts of the Brahmaputra Valley for nearly 600 years (Barpujari, 1980). When they started consolidating in the region and occupied parts of the kingdom of Manipur as well, the Northeast started shaping up as a volatile border between the British Indian territory to the west and the Burmese empire to the east. This pre-colonial border area saw occasional skirmishes, raids, and political stand-offs as the British – headquartered in neighboring Calcutta (now, Kolkata) – fomented unrest against the Burmese empire using the communities here (Myint-U, 2001).

These communities could be recruited to resist the Burmese because the *Manor Din* (Burmese days) in Assam (Barpujari, 1980) and the *Chahi-Taret Khuntakpa* (seven years of devastation) in Manipur (Birachandra, 2009) were characterized by extreme atrocities on the people and devastation of the land. The proxy wars ended when the first Anglo-Burmese war broke out in 1824. It was one of the most expensive wars, with heavy military and financial losses for both the British and the Burmese. The war culminated in the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, following which the Burmese ceded their Assam and Manipur territories to the British.<sup>4</sup> The British annexed these territories to the Bengal Presidency of India (1826–1873).

Once the Brahmaputra Valley – the larger of the two river valleys that comprise the physical area of Assam – came under their control, the British began expanding their empire into the Barak (upper Surma) Valley, the hill areas of Assam, and (present day) Meghalaya by occupying the kingdoms of the Kachari and Jaintia kings. The Naga Hills (Nagaland today) were formally annexed in 1866 and despite political and armed resistance, the British continued to spread their influence in the region. Assam (including parts of Nagaland and Meghalaya) was reshaped as a Chief Commissioner's Province in 1874. It was dissociated from the Bengal Presidency, and Sylhet in the Surma valley was made a part of it.<sup>5</sup> The Mizo Hills (Mizoram today), where the British had been making steady inroads, formally became a part of this new province in 1895. Manipur, meanwhile, remained a protectorate state, administered by political agents who were subordinated to the Chief Commissioner of Assam (Phanjoubam, 2017).

The Partition of the Bengal Presidency in 1905 changed the administrative contours of Assam yet again: it was yoked with Eastern Bengal and placed under a lieutenant governor. Tripura, a British protectorate since 1809, was also made a part of the lieutenant governor's province as Hill Tippera. Following strong protests – mostly from Bengal – the Partition was annulled in 1911 and Assam, once again, became a Chief Commissioner's Province. It remained so till 1947 when the British left India, having irrevocably conjoined the political destiny of the Northeast with the rest of India. Meanwhile, since the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, the British had been cautiously extending their control into what constitutes Arunachal Pradesh today. In 1914, this sensitive area bordering China was named the North East Frontier Tracts. Though administered by the provincial governor, the Tracts were “kept outside the purview of regular laws of the country” (Bath and Babin, 2021, 116).

The nomenclature “North East” used for Arunachal Pradesh by the British was a directional term coined for administrative convenience in the frontier province of Assam. It did not cover the idea or the imagination of the entire region; the British Indian territory east of the Chicken's Neck was, as a whole, more readily identified as/with Assam.<sup>6</sup> In postcolonial India, though, the term “Northeast” came to be used “as an official place-name” that “carries with it the weight of a number of haphazard and poorly thought-out decisions made by managers of the postcolonial Indian state as they were trying to turn an imperial frontier space into the national space of a ‘normal sovereign state.’” (Baruah, 2020a, 2).

Most of these decisions were based on the security concerns of a recently decolonized State in its bid to protect its new-found territorial sovereignty. The Northeast, with its international borders with East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Burma/Myanmar, Bhutan, and China became a “national security” concern (*ibid.*). This, coupled with the resources that the region had to offer – coal, oil, forests, uranium – inspired the State to reorganize the colonial frontier province several times in the ensuing decades till it took shape as the seven sister states and acquired its present political and territorial contours.<sup>7</sup> The name “Assam,” which had earlier occupied the popular and policy imaginations, was replaced by the place-name “Northeast” as a “significant administrative concept” in the years following the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act 1971 that created the North-Eastern Council (NEC) “as its regional planning and security organization” (B.P. Singh, 1987, 257).

Given this intricate, often haphazard, historical and political geography, it is inevitable that the discussion in this book will shift between the more frequent use of the term Assam alone and the occasional references to the Northeast as a whole. The post-independence formulations are used for the most part, and every effort has been made to guide the reader carefully through the discussion keeping in mind the distinctive development of the directional place-name of the Northeast and the changing spatial-making narrative here. Primarily, though, this is a study of the ethno-nationalist conflicts in

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Assam in the last nearly four decades after the Northeast – more or less – assumed its current political contours. These conflicts emerged since the late 1980s following the signing of the Assam Accord between the Government of India and representatives of the leaders of the Assam Andolan, a mass civil-disobedience movement that lasted six years between 1979 and 1985.

### **The Conflicts**

In the early post-independence years, the Andolan proved to be a turning point in Assam's (relatively) non-confrontational relationship with the Indian State. Political, and often violent, conflicts had previously erupted in other parts of the Northeast: the Nagas, for instance, resisted inclusion in the Indian Union since before its formation in 1947. The Mizos began their independentist movement in 1966: this movement was inspired by the apathy toward, and misgovernance of, the Mizo Hills by the Assam government. The hierarchy of the hills and the plains that was introduced by the colonizers (Baruah, 2020a, 29) – and reinforced in post-independence times by the Indian State in its bid to reorganize the Northeast – led to this and similar other divisions among the communities of Assam and the Northeast. The autonomy movements of the Dimasa and Karbi communities in the twin hill districts of Assam, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, began after Mizoram was reorganized as a separate state in 1987. As Phanjoubam (2017, 1) states: “certain geographies – in this case, those of contiguous mountains and the river valleys below them – are integral, and any attempt to disrupt or dismember this integrity will result in political unrests and even deadly frictions.”

Assam's history is, thus, one of frictions caused by the introduction of the hill–valley and similar other dichotomies based on tribal–non-tribal, caste Hindu–converted Hindu, and such other differences. These fragmentations alienated entire communities and created conflicts between them and between the communities and the State itself. By studying these vertical and horizontal conflicts, this book aims to understand the role of hegemonic post-colonial nation-states in perpetuating political conflicts among peripheral populations. The way in which the peripheral populations then negotiate their place and engage with the State indicates how power operates at various levels and intersections of interaction. Such a gendered study of the multi-layered operations of power in geopolitical peripheries is essential in order to uncover pathways to engendered, organic peace in marginal spaces and among marginalized peoples globally.

### **Engendering the Northeast's Conflict Literature**

This book focuses on the men and the women of the periphery at the intersection of ethnicity and nationality, and explores their gendered and geopolitical marginality. However, it was largely by following the women into the marginal spaces they occupy that I discovered the applicable insights and solutions

that I put forward in the book in order to break the cycle of violence that characterizes intractable conflict zones like Assam and the Northeast. During field research (2004–2010) for my first book, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam* (2014), I saw that Assam's women were conspicuously absent from the political processes of peacemaking and post-conflict reconstruction. This invisibility seemed unfair given their historically significant contributions to the ethno-nationalist movements. As I started noticing their elision, I also simultaneously perceived what seemed suspiciously like the women's complacency in their own silencing. Initially, therefore, I started working on this book from a place of anger. As I started framing my research questions, however, I realized what I needed instead was to reframe my own approach as much as the narratives of conflict and peace in Assam; in other words, I needed to cultivate an engendered understanding.

I started revisiting my ideas about women's complicity in their own marginalization in Assam's conflict-habituated environment. I realized then that I was making several presumptions from a position of privilege. A member of the dominant community in Assam, and one who never faced any of the social and cultural prejudices other communities habitually faced, I was being educated in elite institutions on the mainland at a time when many other women were facing the worst impacts of violent conflicts. Being a woman myself was evidently not qualification enough for me to understand empathetically the dehumanizing experiences of these other women who had retreated into their marginalized spaces and apparently renounced agency. I was still outside, looking in.

Since 2011, though, I located myself in Assam to work, initially as an editor at a hyperlocal daily newspaper, and subsequently as assistant professor at a public institution of higher education. I took weekend trips and minibreaks to travel outside the city and around Assam and parts of the Northeast. I started talking to more women with this book in mind while sitting in the marketplace with them, or meeting them in seminars and workshops, visiting their homes and sharing meals with them, learning about and buying their crafts at fairs and festivals. At the time, I had just left a five-year-long violent and abusive marriage. To understand the abuse and deal with the resultant trauma, I had started critically studying the structural and social violences that forced me to stay in a bad marriage for so long (U. Goswami, 2013). As I was researching the violence-affected women of Assam, I was also facing continued harassment from my spouse. Simultaneously, I was experiencing systemic abuse and witnessing how the police and legal systems favor powerful men. Fear for my safety and the safety of my infant son and my family who sheltered me, paralyzed me, limiting my public engagements.

While fighting these larger battles, though, I was continuing my work as a means of quietly coping. I published four books, received a Fulbright post-doctoral fellowship in 2016, and left India to write this book. In the United States, as I continued working on the book and taught at several universities, I realized that my life had not stopped playing itself out despite the web of

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fear and oppression woven by my abuser, a web in which I got entangled even in the United States. And as I was living this life despite the anxieties of the present and fears for the future, I was also simultaneously – but subliminally – healing. This is when I received a clear insight into the noiseless, invisible agency of the women of Assam as well.

Researchers have argued for including autoethnographic vignettes – as I do above – “as a means of enhancing the representational richness and reflexivity of qualitative research,” while giving glimpses into the ethnographer’s understanding and approach (Humphreys, 2005, 840). My approach to this book is entirely informed by reflections into my own positionality and biography. In doing this, I integrate myself into my research, thereby being more open and honest about it while also acknowledging its partial nature (England, 1994, 251). After all, feminist methodologies encourage reflection “on how our location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research, and how we write our research” (*ibid.*).

My reflexivity subsequently redirected me to an entirely different set of research questions. Instead of beginning and concluding with the obvious victimization of the marginalized women in the troubled periphery, my aim now became to question the nature of this victimization. By analyzing its interaction with mainstream masculinity and patriarchal structures, I also started examining the impact of this victimization on the conflict dynamics. Additionally, my research questions started moving beyond the obvious: I had started with the question of whether the invisibility of Assam’s women on the public forums was a convenient elision from the continuing deliberations between the parties in conflict. I now dived deeper to examine if the women were, on the contrary, challenging the dominant narrative invisibly and noiselessly. As I recalibrated my approach, my anger turned into a quiet appreciation of the alternate approaches to peacemaking that may be unrecognized but are, nonetheless, being woven into Assam’s social fabric by the women in their marginalized existences away from public political platforms.

### ***Making Space in Asian Feminisms***

Engendering, in feminist peace research, involves two simultaneous processes. It emphasizes the need to deconstruct the gender bias in knowledge claims by revealing the entrenched androcentrism “in fundamental categories, in empirical studies and in theoretical perspectives.” The aim is to locate the “invisible” women, and reclaim their “activities, experience, and understanding.” The second process involves the reconstruction of “a gender-sensitive theory and practice (i.e., exploring theoretical implications of taking gender seriously)” (Reimann, 2001, 22).

This book locates itself within the engendered scholarship of peace and conflict in Asia – particularly in South Asia – but finds that most of this scholarship is confined to the heartlands. In introducing women’s movements from the Asian perspective, Roces (2010) talks about transnational networking

by feminist movements across national borders. There is, however, no reference to the women in the Asian borderlands: just like the geopolitical marginalization of their location, these women also remain marginalized in the feminist alliances forged by the women who would be allies and who are situated in the heartlands of the respective Asian nations. When looking beyond borders, then, the border areas are themselves overlooked. There is no focus, for instance, on the women or the gendered nature of the conflicts in Burma's Kachin region, nor is there any representation of the struggles of the Rohingya women in Burma and Bangladesh. While discussing the "Rights talk and the feminist movement in India" Sumi Madhok (2010, 237) admits that historically "one area which has been glaringly missing from feminist scholarship" is the women of the Northeast and their prolonged struggle with state power and militarization.

In the Introduction to *South Asian Feminisms* – a volume of essays that "engages complex new challenges to feminist theory and activism that have emerged in recent years" – Loomba and Lukose (2012, 12) also acknowledge that "India has had no dearth of state-driven and separatist violence within its post-independence territorial borders and boundaries, particularly in the northeast.... Feminist attention to such issues is relatively sparse, despite the fact that women have been at the forefront of movements against militarization in these areas." Their volume, like other studies in South Asian feminisms, does not have any essays focusing on the women of the Northeast or exploring a gendered understanding of the conflicts in the region. The Northeast being an overwhelmingly Anglophone part of India with a rich history of activism and scholarship, it is surprising that no feminist voices from the region have found space in this – and similar other – transnational explorations of feminisms in South Asia.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, established and emerging scholars from within the Northeast<sup>9</sup> have written extensively on women's agency and active participation in the conflict situations of the region (T. Misra, 2010; A. Mahanta, 1998; A. Dutta and Bhuyan, 2008; Brara, 2008; Nag, 2006; Thangjam, 2005). Recent scholarly interventions have also engaged with the women involved in insurgency movements and active combat in the region (Moral, 2014; S. Choudhury, 2017). Very few of these voices, however, have found space in the more visible and accessible explorations of South Asian feminisms, particularly the ones led by scholars located inside Western academia. Twice removed from the geopolitical peripheries of postcolonial South Asian nations, marginality, for them, often fades at the centers of these South Asian nations. Even within feminist scholarship, then, there exists a differential of power between the heartlands and hinterlands, the center and its margins or, in this book's formulation, the mainland and the periphery.

This book, of course, is grounded in the understanding of marginality as a relational concept. Chapter 2 elaborates how there are margins within margins, just as there are also margins within centers and centers within margins. Roces and Edwards' (2010) work on Asian women is undoubtedly

an essential step towards challenging the Eurocentrism and Western biases of global gender studies. Explorations that give voice to South Asian and Indian women specifically – such as S. Roy (2012), Loomba and Lukose (2012), and Jha and Kurian (2019) – all amplify silent (and often silenced) conversations. They also mention the women of the Northeast, but none of them include the voices of the women within the periphery. More studies of Asian and other global feminisms need to focus on the marginalized within the marginalized constituencies. For authenticity of representation rather than ventriloquism or patronization, voices from within these margins need to be accommodated and augmented. This book exists in the void where the voices from the margins are only faintly heard.

### ***Gender Studies and Northeast Women***

As opposed to the lack of representation in the international and trans-national academic forums, there is growing interest on the Indian mainland in women's fictional and creative non-fictional narratives from the Northeast. Feminist publishing houses like Zubaan and Kali for Women have, of course, been giving voice to writings of and about the women of the Northeast since long before conflict literature from the region gained popularity and became "saleable" in the national market. Set apart from the voices of the mainland women by its divergent history, the Northeast developed "a strong and unusual tradition of women writers" (Thumb Print, 2014). The mainland's mainstream publishers were disinterested in this "unusual" tradition, because there was skepticism about "the northeast being a subject matter of universal interest" (ibid.). Because of its "lack of visibility within certain frames of reference" (ibid.) this body of women's writing did not find publisher or audience on the mainland. However, as fiction writers like Anjum Hasan and Jahnavi Barua started receiving international recognition – and being nominated to, or shortlisted in, international literary awards like the Man Asia Literary Prize, the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize – more and more mainstream publishers began abandoning their guarded approach to women's writing from the region.

A wide gap still exists between the mainland and the periphery: for the people of the mainland, the Northeast continues to be a part, and yet apart. The rise in the volume of published literature – especially women's writing – is symptomatic of the steadily growing efforts on the mainland to reach out to the people in the periphery. An increasing number of voices from the periphery are also speaking up about belonging and building bridges. Despite these developments, however, the region continues to be racially "othered" and its women sexualized. Cases of migrant women from the Northeast being raped and molested in Indian cities are reported with alarming frequency (FE Online, 2017; K. P. Singh, 2015). More recently, after the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic, the people from the Northeast who look more like their Southeast Asian and East Asian neighbors are being racially targeted.

The report of a Northeast girl being called “coronavirus” and spat at near Delhi University inspired many other people from the region to come forward with similar stories of racial profiling and harassment (India Today Web Desk, 2020).

S. Baruah (2020b) traces this “racialized gaze” back to its colonial origins, which relegated visually identifiable people from the Northeast to the “Mongolian fringe” of the Himalayan region, including “Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and northern Assam” and encompassing “most peoples of Central and eastern Asia, including Tibetans, the Chinese and the Japanese.” This gaze set the people of the Northeast apart from “India proper” racially, culturally, and historically. S. Baruah (*ibid.*) illustrates how this racialized gaze is also “to some extent inscribed into institutional practices of the state.” The result is that the Indian State has “missed opportunities for generating pan-Indian social solidarity based on trust and reciprocity” (*ibid.*) with the peoples of the region.

Against this backdrop, my book argues that a gendered understanding of the mainland–periphery relationship, especially since it is conflictual, will help bridge the distance between the populations. Such a gendered reading will require entering the spaces occupied by the periphery’s marginalized constituencies; not just the women. It will, thus, provide an inside view and a more authentic understanding of how the Indian State’s hyper-masculinist power operates in marginal spaces. The mainland’s marginalized entities need to heed these experiences of the periphery’s marginalized inhabitants because these experiences hold applicable lessons for them. By critically reflecting on these lessons, the people of the alienated land masses can move towards less conflictual, mutually empathetic relationships (U. Goswami, 2020). A feminist approach to understanding the ethno-nationalist conflicts of the Northeast is, therefore, essential.

It has been remarked that feminism in India continues to be characterized by “a very rich body of writing on women’s activism but a sparseness of theoretical writing on feminism” (Chaudhuri, 2005, xi). In creating a narrative to counter the existing gender-blind (hence, predominantly andro-centric) literature, a lot of the extant feminist writing focuses exclusively on the women; this is overwhelmingly true of the writings on peace and security in the Northeast. As Nagel (1998, 243) pointed out, “the critique of classical literature on the nation and state has resulted in an almost exclusive focus on women – women revolutionaries, women leaders, women’s hidden labour, women’s exploitation, women’s resistance to domination.” This approach has also informed both theory and praxis in the Northeast among the feminist activists and scholars operating from and within the region. This book intends to avoid using the terms “gender” and “women” as synonymous.

### ***Existing Approaches in Northeast Conflict Literature***

It must be mentioned here that – albeit inadvertently – existing conflict literature pertaining to the region has often used tools common to critical

feminism. For example, the different kinds of conflicts in the Northeast are characterized by many nuances and intricate interconnections. They are informed by many hegemonies and there exist many intersections between the different types of conflicts in the region, whether with reference to orientation or causation. Thus, the vertical and horizontal conflicts – those between the center and the periphery, and those between the constituents of the periphery – have rarely been studied as mutually exclusive categories (Bhaumik, 2009; U. Goswami, 2014; U. Misra, 2000; S. Baruah, 1999). Similarly, if ethnic politics has been identified as the root cause of many of these conflicts, it has also necessarily been linked to development policies, environmental degradation, and the political ecology (Karlsson, 2011). Settler-indigenous conflicts, for example, – like the Bodo-Adivasi<sup>10</sup> or Bodo-Muslim conflicts of Assam – have been studied in reference to ethnic power struggles that are also competitions for environmental and resource control (Geiger, 2015). Despite such intersectional understanding, there have rarely been attempts at going beyond theoretical frameworks informing ethnicity and nationality studies, conflict and conflict-transformation studies, as well as women's studies.

## **Methodology**

This book also uses these theoretical frameworks eclectically, but it is additionally informed by feminist peace theory and pro-feminist masculinity studies as well as relevant studies of violence against women. It is a qualitative study wherein the relevance of these theoretical frameworks to the empirical facts as they present themselves in the field has been considered. The (perhaps) ambitious aim is to explore the applicability of the book's findings to uncover practical solutions and policy implications for the case-study area, as well as to explore their bearing on similar global situations where centers and peripheries of power are engaged in conflictual relationships.

### ***Ethnography and Feminist Ethnography***

Toward this goal, research for the book relies heavily on feminist research methods, since feminist research, by definition, is oriented towards supporting social justice and social transformation (Hesse-Biber and Brooks, 2007). As a research method that cannot be programmed, ethnography was thought to be best suited for a conflict zone where the researcher has to be prepared for the sudden and the unexpected at all times. Therefore, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in various places of Assam, with occasional excursions to other states of the Northeast, such as Manipur and Nagaland. The most volatile conflict zones within Assam today have been taken into special consideration. These include the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) – renamed as the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in 2020 – and the twin hill districts of Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong. Fieldwork was spread over a period of six years, from 2011 to 2016 and briefly, in 2020 and 2021. A lot

of my field experience, however, also draws from research conducted in the Northeast since 2004 in the course of earlier studies and especially for my previous monograph, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam* (2014).

For a scholar of conflict and peace, when home is where the conflict is, ethnographic fieldwork can be both easy and difficult. Familiarity with and feeling for the field aid empathetic understanding. Existing familial and friendly networks are also an asset. For me, all of this made it easier to identify specific pockets of intense conflict that were also suitable for fieldwork and that afforded quick access and egress, if it came to that. The difficulty, though, comes with too much ease and too much familiarity. Emotional connections can sometimes jeopardize the processes by which a researcher acquires the intellectual distance required for critical evaluation of the field experience.

In my case, although I grew up in Assam, most of my adult life was spent away from home. Most families who could afford it, sent their children away from the shadow of conflict to pursue their education and careers on the mainland. That the infrastructure and opportunities were superior elsewhere in India was definitely another significant consideration. I belong to that generation of children who grew up during the worst of the conflicts in Assam and were sent to the mainland with the specter of violence haunting them. Distance brought with it an amount of reflexivity. Away from the seduction of ultra-nationalism and militant nativism that characterized our adolescent years, scholarship and exposure to critical literature and thought processes in an atmosphere marked by relative peace instilled in us a new understanding of the real nature of the troubles back home. Historical kinship ties were reimagined and reinvented away from the homeland. New communities of belonging cutting across ethnic boundaries and new solidarities developed on the mainland, and these were at complete odds with the continued conflicts back home (U. Goswami, 2017). Observing this ambivalence instilled in me a wish to revisit my roots, critically and from an intellectual distance. Ethnography was inevitable, and feminist ethnography helped me engage critically with the dualism of etic (outsider) and emic (insider) perspectives. In this book, therefore, I am assuming “a stance that acknowledges the researcher’s position right up front, and that does not think of objectivity and subjectivity as warring with each other, but rather as serving each other” (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992, 263).

In any case, despite the ethnographer’s commitment to objectivity, ethnographic truths are always partial (Marcus, 1986). And this is true of both outsider and insider research. All knowledge, the proponents of feminist objectivity also hold, is “situated knowledge”: “subjective, power-imbued and relational” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, 9). There was no call, therefore, for me to be apologetic about studying what I am familiar with. Feminists have also laid out the importance of emotions and values in the research process and rejected the binary between the rational and emotional (Hesse-Biber and Brooks, 2007). In fact, some have underlined the need for feminist research projects

to begin with women's lives (Smith, 1987). Reflexivity and an awareness of positionality, though, are always called for, and this is where feminist ethnography diverges from classical ethnography.

### ***Reflexivity***

As discussed in the previous section on "Engendering the Northeast's Conflict Literature," I have constantly used reflexivity as a tool in my research. Reflections into my own positionality and biography not only informed my research questions but also shaped my field interactions and observations. One of the earliest questions I was forced to face when I began ethnography in the conflict areas of the Northeast was why I, as a member of the dominant Axamiyā community of Assam, was using a method of study that, by all accounts, was embedded in the colonial enterprise (Gobo, 2008). I had before me the ethnographies of indigenous communities written by colonial administrators and Christian missionaries disguised as anthropologists. I grew up amidst the social and political turmoil of the 1980s that intensified ethnic fragmentation in Assam, catalyzed by my own community's neo-colonizing approach towards the other population groups. And often, in the field, engaging with people who saw me as a representative of my community, I was subjected to a lot of suspicion and treated with circumspection. A Bodo politician, formerly a dreaded insurgent, once accused me of trying to rake up old issues and reopen wounds that were now healed.

In many cases, it took me time and some effort to break through this barrier of suspicion that was informed by a feeling of being "other"-ed and scrutinized yet again through the neo-colonizer's gaze. But a simple appreciation of and non-judgmental participation in the ways of life of the people that I was studying was enough to open the gates for me. It was then that I began to comprehend the level of discrimination and degradation many of the ethnic and migrant communities of Assam had been subjected to for centuries. And ethnography, eventually, also became a means of effecting ethnic reconciliation for me.

Access is key in ethnography, but in fragmented and conflict-habituated societies like Assam, "such access depends heavily on the perception of the research and researcher within the community, in which cultural awareness and identity politics play a key role" (Chisholm, 2016, 138). But once access is granted, the way it was to me, there are always issues regarding "how the investigator then represents the dynamic and conflicting nature of these communities" (*ibid.*). Continued access often depends on such representation. My writings and research over more than a decade have helped me build a rapport with the communities I study and that has kept the lines of communication open.

However, there is another significant barrier that I have to constantly negotiate in engaging with the people – especially the men – I meet in the field, and that involves the perils of being a woman on the move. Growing up a woman in a militarized society,<sup>11</sup> mobility was always restricted, even in the urban

surroundings of my childhood, by the dangers of being struck by stray bullets or raped by Indian security personnel. The fear this instilled in me for personal safety remains ingrained. Moving now in rural, often hitherto unexplored areas of conflict, meeting the men with guns (both from the security forces as well as former insurgents), and confronting them with questions involved a lot of adjustments in posture, positioning, and perceptions of power.

For instance, the usually simple decision of “what to wear” often became a crucial factor in how I would be perceived and where I would be permitted into in the field. Often, in engaging with the men, I would choose “Western” attires (mostly, jeans and a loose-fitting t-shirt) that would take away any hint of “feminine weakness” and also give me an air of being different from other women who need “protecting” from the harsh realities of conflict. On the other hand, when attending public events in the local communities, I would opt to wear the traditional dresses of the respective community. Learning to eat and cook the local food wherever I went, similarly, eased access and strengthened acceptance, both among the women and the men. Amidst the volatile atmosphere where uber-masculinities were often on display, I was frequently forced to make the split-second decision of whether to retreat into the traditional trappings of “femininity” or exhibit masculinized attributes in order to put my interlocutors at ease.

### ***Interviews***

These options could be considered more carefully in the cases where interviews were scheduled in advance. I have interviewed over a hundred people since 2004, when I first started working on the Northeast. I frequently interspersed my ethnographic fieldwork among the communities with interviews of male and female activists, politicians, journalists, and intellectuals, as well as State and non-State armed personnel, based both in the region and on the mainland. After studied consideration, I sometimes found myself making a decision that would take my interviewee(s) outside their comfort zone: such as opting to interview some men at their homes in the presence of their families instead of agreeing to meet them in their office or at a restaurant. Years of training and functioning as a journalist had taught me how information could sometimes also be gleaned from what was left unsaid, or expressed through body language. After all, recording what is said during interviews is just as important as observation and listening/reading between the lines (Atherton, 2016).

Interviews, like ethnography, are also about power and control, and when it comes to a woman interviewing a man, the nuances are too many. I found that, often, if I allowed my interviewee the control over the space and place of interview, information was more easily forthcoming. I sometimes allowed them complete control over the duration and time of interview. I even left my interviews unstructured unless otherwise requested by my interviewee. However, I did keep a strict control over the line of enquiry and always went into an interview with a predefined set of questions that I eased into the

conversation. Keeping the conversation free flowing, I found, opened up new avenues for exploration and brought to the surface questions that I had not formerly anticipated.

One of the major issues that I was forced to confront in the course of my interviews and fieldwork was that of impartiality. For instance, in interacting with Indian security personnel, some of whom had been in charge of counter-insurgency operations at the peak of militancy in Assam, I would often have to push aside childhood's traumatic memories of women raped and killed, and the warnings from elders not to look up at passing military vehicles on the way to school for fear of becoming one of them. I would have to keep reminding myself that it was a system that had to be held accountable, not a particular person or persons. Or when I would be interviewing well known intellectuals who, during the violent years, had been condemned by people from my own community as being anti-national, I would have to be constantly reevaluating the rhetoric of nationalism, of inclusion and exclusion, of tolerance and intolerance, that had shaped my adolescent mind. Revisiting my politics in this way, through reflexivity and feminist objectivity, I believe has enriched both my thinking and my research.

When I returned to Assam to start working on this book after a prolonged stay of nearly 15 years on the mainland, I felt myself suitably equipped with these tools. After nearly five years in the field, though, I realized I needed, yet again, to remove myself physically from my field study area so as to achieve the requisite critical distance. I started writing this book, therefore, in the United States, with funding from the Fulbright fellowship. I finish it now, back in Assam, because that is where the book belongs.

### ***Documentary Sources***

During my fieldwork in Assam, for my primary documentary sources, I collected and consulted pamphlets, constitutions, demand notes, journals, and newsletters from insurgent organizations of the Northeast. My analysis also relies on and refers to a lot of gray literature, including NGO reports, policy documents, working papers, newsletters, government documents, speeches, and white papers. Newspaper articles and books in the local languages have been invaluable sources. It is true, of course, that it is not possible for me to be familiar with all the languages of the many communities I have interacted with in the course of my research. But where I have been unable to read myself, I have relied on local translators and interpreters. Often, these sources are neglected by most Anglophone researchers and, as a result, only a partial picture emerges. The present book wishes to avoid that trap.

### **Book Map**

This introduction is intended to frame the book's approach to power, patriarchy, and marginality through a gendered understanding of ethno- and

sub-nationalist conflicts in geopolitical peripheries of modern Asian nation-states. It presents to the reader the methodologies and sources that inform and enrich the study. It also situates the book in the existing literature on feminist research in Asia and acquaints the reader with the book's specific location in Assam in Northeast India.

Chapter 1, “Why Assam?: Making Peace in Peripheries,” takes the reader deeper into the book’s specific location in Assam, one of India’s eight north-eastern states. It also establishes why Assam particularly lends itself to a gendered study of multilayered operations of power in geopolitical peripheries. Nestled between South, East, and Southeast Asia, and part of the Asian “arc of instability,” addressing conflicts in Assam – and its adjoining/sister “geographies of ignorance” – is crucial to finding peace in the entire transnational region. Assam is the perfect illustration of how power functions in societies when varying levels of patriarchal control collide. Marginality is a relational concept and margins are places of immense possibilities: Assam is a textbook case for studying shifting margins, power, positionality, and possibilities of peace. A gendered study of the multilayered operations of, and negotiations with, power in Assam can help uncover pathways to engendered, organic peace among marginalized and conflict-habituated peoples globally.

Chapter 2, “Men in Margins: Masculinity and Conflict,” begins by introducing why communities in Assam are in intractable conflict among themselves and with the State. In exploring these horizontal and vertical conflicts, the chapter addresses one of the central concerns of this book: the consequences of violent collision between disparate nationalities and sub-nationalities with varying levels and structures of patriarchal control. Relying on post-colonial, pro-feminist masculinity studies for its analysis, this chapter links shifting gender and ethno-nationalist dynamics as they inform and are, in turn, informed by violent intractable conflicts and militarism. By scrutinizing this link, the goal is to identify the obstacles towards building structures of equality, addressing which would help find pathways to peaceful coexistence.

Chapter 3 of the book, “Many Violences: Conflict as Habit,” examines the many forms that intractable conflicts take and the different kinds of interconnected violence they inform: sexual and political, intimate and public. By expanding upon the links made in earlier chapters between militarization, hypermasculinization, and gendered violence in the context of protracted ethno-nationalist conflicts, the chapter reflects on the peace established by ceasefires and treaties. Such “peace” is characterized by de-escalation of (and, sometimes, disengagement from) political violence, but not the delegitimization or non-use of such violence. As a result, the cycle of brutality and bloodshed keeps recurring in society, drawing from the existing structures and cultures of conflict. People become conflict-habituated and violence among them takes on different shapes and mutates using various tools. Often, however, – because there is no apparent escalation or exacerbation of the scale of violence – proclamations of peace are made. This chapter underlines the need to reject such proclamations and work toward establishing positive

peace based on cooperation and mutual healing, especially among the most marginalized constituencies such as migrant communities and women.

The marginalized women of the militarized, hypermasculinized periphery take centerstage in the book's inquiry in Chapter 4, "Women Underground: Marginal, Peripheral?" The chapter questions the elision of these women from public politics and platforms of post-insurgency political reconciliation and reconstruction. Such elision and silencing have happened even though they actively participated in ethnic movements and shaped a strong and visible history of political activism. This chapter enters some of the marginal spaces where the invisible women now live, away from the masculinized public and political platforms. It finds that these women are creating a new reality during conflict and making positive peace through powerful yet non-confrontational ways that also redefine gendered relationships. In creating this new reality, the chapter argues, the women of Assam hold up lessons for centers and peripheries of power that are engaged in conflictual relationships globally.

The discussion at the end of the book in "Peace Praxis and Reflexivity," acts as a postscript rather than a conclusion. It advances the book's main approach and arguments. It revisits the book's goal of engendering the post-independence conflictual association of Assam with mainland India to reclaim women's histories and reconstruct a gendered analysis of Assam's ethno-nationalist conflicts that are the consequence of this long association. Additionally, it reassesses the pathways that the book argues will lead to engendering peace in violent geopolitical peripheries globally, while reiterating the need for combining practice, politics, and theory in building positive and organic peace. Such peace will both draw from and inform the experiences of marginalized constituencies. To that end, critical reflection on the past experiences of marginalization must accompany the hope for a just and equitable feminist future. This future must be open to constantly interrogating itself so that it does not replicate previously existing patterns of dominance and subjugation, reigniting violence.

## Notes

- 1 The conceptualization of the center-periphery relationship here is loosely based on the existing cross-disciplinary studies of "core/periphery network structures characterizing complex sets of cooperative and competitive interactions between network nodes" (Csermely et al., 2013, 93).
- 2 Arc of instability, in international relations, refers to geographically contiguous States experiencing intra-State conflicts that have implications for domestic, regional, and international security. Originating in the defense thinking of the strategic community in 1990s Australia, it encompasses the ASEAN countries and South Pacific regions where "various forms of intra-state conflict – secessionist movements, civil wars, communal violence, and so on – have become an increasing threat to political stability and state security in many countries" (Reilly, 2002, 7). This formulation fails to take into account the interconnectedness of the Northeast Indian states with their immediate Southeast and East Asian neighbors.

- 3 For a detailed history of Sikkim and its association with the Indian Union, see Dattaray (2013), Duff (2015), and Sidhu (2018).
- 4 Independentist groups of Assam and Manipur contend that the Treaty of Yandaboo is invalid as it did not involve the legitimate local rulers.
- 5 Despite strong reactions both in the Brahmaputra and the Surma valleys against the inclusion of Sylhet in Assam, it remained a part of Assam till 1947 when a referendum was held and Sylhet became a part of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).
- 6 This was, in no small measure, inspired by the European tea planters' lobby, which depended on the global recognition "Assam tea" had acquired (Baruah, 2020a, 44).
- 7 Baruah (2020a, 86) points out how India's "postcolonial coal boom" since the 1970s followed the reorganization of the Northeast, "and it unfolded when developing the 'backward areas' of Northeast India emerged as an important policy priority of the Indian government."
- 8 I have often heard "international" scholars rue the lack of English translations of local feminist writings as the reason for their omission from such explorations. However, many feminist writers from the region are bilingual and write both in the local languages as well as in English. Translations – and translators – from the local languages to English are also abundant and prolific.
- 9 Within the field of peace and conflict studies, researchers from outside the region (including the Indian heartland/mainland) have analyzed the role of women as victims or survivors of violent conflict (P. Banerjee 2000, 2001; Manchanda 2001, 2005). A few others have considered the peace and security implications of women's agency in the conflict environment (Kolás, 2017a, 2017b). I draw on and connect to their works in the rest of the book. The current discussion, however, is limited to the scholars from within the region and the space they occupy – or not – in the Asian/South Asian feminist research.
- 10 "Adivasi" literally means "original inhabitant" and is an umbrella term used to denote the Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Gond, Khond, Kisang, Nagesia, Savara, Godova, Proja, Pankha, Lohar, Ghasi, Turi, and Baurie communities. These "tribal" groups from "mainland" India had migrated to Assam since the late nineteenth century in search of arable lands and were also brought – often forcibly – to the state as indentured labor by European tea planters.
- 11 "Militarism ... can be defined in straightforward terms as an ideology which promotes the unproblematic acceptance of militaries and their (often preferential) use in international relations. Related to this, militarisation describes the processes and practices which support and enable the (re)production of militarism" (Rech et al., 2016, 3).

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# 1 Why Assam?

## Making Peace in Peripheries

### Introduction

Galtung (1971, 81) analyzes the core–periphery dynamic in systems of imperial dominance as one that “splits up collectivities and relates some of the parts to each other in relations of harmony of interest, and other parts in relations of disharmony of interests, or conflict of interest.” The result is “tremendous inequality ... in almost all aspects of human living conditions”; additionally, this inequality resists change (*ibid.*). The experiences of the peripheral peoples of the Northeast in colonial and post-colonial India attest to this outcome of core dominance. Where they diverge from Galtung’s conception of dominance and subjugation, however, is in defying the rules he identifies as defining the interaction between the peripheries and between the peripheries and the outside world. According to these rules, such interactions are mediated through the center/core which aims to monopolize and control the periphery’s “interaction with the outside world” (Galtung, 1971, 89).

Such a vision of an all-powerful imperialist State has been challenged in emerging scholarship that identifies paracolonial networks and formations that both interwove with and resisted the colonial program (Pernau, 2022, 425). These formations are studied in the light of “continuity and indigenous agency, if not a persistence of some aspects of precolonial knowledge systems and practices” (Pernau, 2022, 427). The borderland communities of multi-ethnic societies like the Northeast and its transnational Asian neighborhood are paracolonial in this sense. These peripheral communities are characterized by intricate and inextricable transborder historical and ethnic ties which are constantly challenged – but never severed – by their postcolonial experience of arbitrary inclusion in their respective nation-states. The postcolonial nation-states have failed to restrict these precolonial ties. The second segment of this chapter (“Assam and Asian Peripheries”) focuses on some of these continuities and connections to place Assam and the Northeast in their transborder neighborhood and to argue for organic and engendered peace here. This volatile conflict zone is nestled between South, East, and Southeast Asia, and constitutes a part of the Asian “arc of instability.” Addressing conflicts

here – and in the adjoining/sister “geographies of ignorance” – is crucial to finding peace in the entire transnational region.

Meanwhile, the first segment (“Assam in Conflict”) establishes Assam as a textbook case for studying the conflictual relationships between the peripheries of the modern nation-state as well as that between the peripheries and the State. The discussion on multiple centers and moving margins in this segment problematizes Galtung’s (1971, 89) rule that in the core–periphery network, the “interaction between Periphery and Periphery is missing”; it explores, instead, how peripheral communities and constituencies in this vibrant border region interact with each other continuously. These interactions occur within a matrix of power that is constantly in flux; here, conditions of peripherality and marginality shift frequently and are constructed and reconstructed relationally. Within these shifting margins, the “vertical” interactions “between Center and Periphery” (Galtung, 1971, 89) are replicated infinitely. These interactions inform and are informed by dichotomous relationships that perpetuate structural, cultural, and direct violences against marginalized peoples. These continuing violences habituate society to conflict so that possibilities of peace are inhibited and conditions of marginality are replicated at multiple levels and locations.

Through a gendered study of the shifting and constantly multiplying margins in Assam, this chapter uncovers the multilayered operations of (and negotiations with) power in geopolitical peripheries where disparate nationalities and sub- and/or ethno-nationalities with varying levels and structures of patriarchal control collide. Exploring the possibility of engendered peace here can help find pathways to organic peace among marginalized and conflict-habituated peoples globally.

## **Assam in Conflict**

### ***Gendered Conflicts in Violent Peripheries***

#### ***Benign patriarchies***

In the late nineteenth century, missionary Susan R. Ward (1884, 2) introduced Assam as the “most north east limit of British India” that had “been very little known till within the past half century.” It does not “bear comparison with some of the more settled and civilized portions of India” (*ibid.*) but in fertility and “salubrity of the climate” and natural beauty, “Assam has scarcely a rival in any part of India of equal extent” (*ibid.*). She added that “the discovery of indigenous tea, and the rapid growth of that industry, has awakened a growing interest in the rich fertile valley of the Brahmaputra” (*ibid.*). Equating Assam with the Northeast as a whole, she said that “the regions around – north, east, and south – Bhutan, Chinese Tartary, the Shan country, and the north of Burmah, are virtually unknown regions” (Ward, 1884, 3). Consequently, Assam was “facetiously” named the “happy valley,” “the last end of creation”

and the “jumping off place” (*ibid.*). The epithet “happy valley” came, no doubt, from the belief that the coming of the colonizers changed the existing “state of anarchy” to “one of continued peace and prosperity, such as had not been known in the province for generations” (Ward, 1884, 2).

It is now nearly a century and a half later, and 75 years since the British left India an independent nation, with Assam (and the Northeast) as a part of it. But the imagination of the Northeast and the way it is viewed from the centers of power on the mainland remain unchanged. For example, India’s National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) assists the government “on policies and programmes for qualitative improvement in school education” (NCERT, 2017a), shaping approaches to teacher training, pedagogical research, and publication of model textbooks. The language and rhetoric it uses to introduce its supplementary reader on the Northeast echoes that of Susan Ward and other white/colonial writers on the region.

Noting “a general lack of awareness about these states of North East India,” one of the writers of the reader/textbook hopes that “the book will be helpful in increasing awareness and understanding about these states among the children of India.” The region has a “special importance in India” because of its location and “cultural and historical uniqueness.” “The landscape, the range of communities and geographical and ecological diversity make these states quite different from other parts of the country.” Though deficient in “industrial and economic development,” it has “abundant forest resources. Petroleum and tea are two significant resources harnessed in the region.” Isolated from the rest of India “because of its location and terrain,” it is less developed. The result has been “social-political disturbances and unrest for a few years.” With the “modernisation of economy and expansion of education,” however, “these states present a picture of modernisation in a relatively difficult and disadvantaged region” (NCERT, 2017b, v–viii).

This benign paternalistic approach of India’s mainland toward its periphery is being increasingly echoed in policy approaches that are undertaking to assimilate the region into the State’s definition of modernization and development. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has, thus, designated the Northeast as India’s “ishan kon” or the northeastern corner, which is the most auspicious place in a house, according to the traditional Indian architectural system of Vastu Sharstra. Modi has also named the eight states the “Asta Lakshmi” – the eight goddesses of wealth and prosperity – that need to be “taken care of” (TNN, 2014).

In this vertical interaction between State and sub-nation, then, Assam (and the Northeast) is the feminized other. The contemporary rhetoric of protection and patronization, however, obfuscates the long history of violent vertical conflicts between the periphery and the mainland. Thus, though the NCERT textbook mentions the Northeast’s “socio-political disturbances and unrest” (NCERT, 2017b, vii), it only makes passing references to the armed Peasant Movement in Manipur in the 1940s–1950s and the insurgency movement in

Mizoram: the latter is inadequately explained away as being caused by the Mautam famine alone.

### *Hyper aggression*

The Mautam famine – caused by bamboo flowering and rat infestation every 50 years or so – leads to immense hardships for the hill people. When it happened in the 1950s and early 1960s, the government failed to provide proper aid and support to the (then) Mizo Hills District, triggering the Mizo Independence Movement. Already, discontent against the centers of power in Assam and on mainland India had been brewing “since the 1930s, and especially after the establishment of the first political party in Mizoram, the Mizo Union in 1946” (Zarzosanga, 2021, 51–52). In 1965, the Mizo Union (which had led the move to join the Mizo Hills to the Indian Union in 1947) complained of “stepmotherly treatment meted out to the Mizo Hills … (that) was responsible for the unfortunate feeling of discontent that we are being treated as second-class citizens” (Bhaumik and Bhattacharya, 2005, 220).

The moderate Union went on to demand a separate state for the Mizos within India; the more radical Mizo National Front (MNF), though, declared independence in 1966. The Mizo Independence Movement (1966–1986) ended when the Mizo Peace Accord was signed between the Government of India and the Mizo leadership. The Mizo Hills were separated from Assam, granted statehood, and renamed Mizoram. During the Movement’s 20 years, however, the Indian Air Force bombed civilian areas and regrouped villages attempting to separate “guerrillas from their sources of information and food.” Between 1967 and 1972, “80 percent of the Mizo population were uprooted from their homes and placed in 102 new villages known as ‘protected and progressive villages’” (N. Goswami, 2009, 585). Such forced displacement not only upset the livelihoods of the people, but also caused “untold cultural and physical violence against the heterogeneous Mizo community speaking different dialects and following different cultural traditions” (Thirumal et al., 2019, 153). An entire body of “terror lore” grew in Mizoram out of the fear and insecurity that people collectively experienced during the insurgency years (Chhangte, 2010).

Such hyperaggression and violence has characterized the mainland’s relationship with the entire Northeast periphery for most of the post-independence period. Any resistance against the State’s hegemonic policies and patriarchal control were met with disproportionate military force, whether they were armed resistances or peaceful social movements. In Assam, for example, to curb all forms of political and social protests in the 1990s, “the Indian Army, other paramilitary forces, and the State police committed numerous acts of abuse, including extrajudicial executions such as the death squad killings” (S. Baruah, 2020, 136).

Such an atmosphere of violence is made possible by the imposition of draconian laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 (AFSPA). The

AFSPA continues to be in force in large areas of the Northeast and gives extraordinary powers to security forces to search, arrest, or kill civilians without due process.<sup>1</sup> The result is a brutalization of the security forces and a legitimization of violence in society at large. This sets in motion a vicious cycle where violence gives birth to more violence, brutalization erodes ideologies, and state-sanctioned terror engenders a disregard for peaceful alternatives. Society, at large, is criminalized (U. Goswami, 2010, 1). Consequently, as in other zones of “insolvable insurgencies” like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, in Assam, too, it has become “difficult to differentiate between insurgents, criminals, and government officials, as the profit motive became at least as salient as political motives, creating a volatile mix of war, crime, and corruption” (Berman, 2012).

Enmeshed in this volatile mix, Assam and the Northeast exist precariously in a post-insurgency phase. Since the turn of the century, the State has contained/managed most of the armed resistance through the signing of treaties and promises of negotiation. The violent structures and cultures that have taken root, though, continue to proliferate. What is more, the nature of violence in society has mutated and taken on different forms. For one, there has been a gradual mutation of gender relations in the periphery over the decades of its conflictual association with the mainland. Additionally, newer hypermasculinist forms of violence have evolved to keep conflicts between the periphery’s constituencies alive, increasing the gap between them and eroding prospects of organic peace.<sup>2</sup>

### *Many violences*

At the height of armed conflict in Assam in the 1990s, when the Indian Security Forces started using rape as a weapon of war, victims like Bhanimai Dutta and Raju Baruah were hailed as “martyrs.” They were forgotten after the independentist movement led by the United Liberation Front of Assom (ULFA) weakened, and former insurgents prepared to join mainstream electoral politics. The ULFA’s widely supported movement also lost its high moral ground when its own brutalization was exposed: in 1998, reports surfaced of the torture and murder of a 16-year-old girl, Roshmi Borah, by its cadres (*The Sentinel*, 1998).

This moral high ground the periphery’s patriarchy habitually assumes is built on the premise that Assam’s women enjoy a more elevated status as compared to the women of the mainland. Traditionally, women did indeed face fewer restrictions and enjoyed more mobility: the proximity to indigenous communities, the overarching influence of Xankardeb’s religious reformist movement of Vaisnavism, and the social security ensured by the military might of Assam’s 600-year-long Ahom rule have been cited as contributing factors (Behal, 2021, 181–182). A rich history of social and political activism also characterized their involvement in the anti-colonial movements prior to 1947. Subsequently, in the various social and political, civil and armed

movements against the Indian State in post-independence times, as well, their contributions were significant (A.P. Hazarika, 2021).

But despite this rich history of public activism and social mobility, “gender divisions are quite deeply entrenched through traditional notions of patriarchy that equate women with carrying the burden of caregiving, subservience to the spouse, and regulated mobility” (Behal, 2021, 182). Within political parties and processes, “they do not have the freedom to seek participation in elections and take on leadership roles” (A.P. Hazarika, 2021, 196). Especially in the post-insurgency public platforms of political reconstruction and ethnic reconciliation, the women are nowhere to be seen or heard (U. Goswami, 2021). Additionally, both in public and private spaces, they face multiple forms of violence. In Assam’s increasingly criminalized society, women no longer enjoy the same mobility and sense of security. According to data released by India’s National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Assam has led India in the statistics on crimes against women for four consecutive years. In 2020, the state’s crime rate against women was 154.3, almost thrice India’s national average (Ramesh, 2021).

Significantly, women are not the only marginalized constituency to face increased direct violence in post-insurgency Assam. In the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD), settler/migrant communities like the Muslims of East Bengali origin and Adivasis are repeatedly targeted in ethnic riots and insurgent attacks. When the second Bodo Accord was signed in 2003,<sup>3</sup> and sections of the Bodo leadership entered electoral politics, violence deescalated; widespread attacks against the migrant communities were suspended. But the peace established in the BTAD was piecemeal: it engaged some sections of the community, excluding others. The armed National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), for one, was left out of the peace process. In a bid to create Bodo majority in the BTAD and continue fighting for a sovereign Bodo homeland, the NDFB took to cleansing Bodoland of migrant communities, triggering ethnic riots in 2010, 2012, and 2014 (Bhaumik, 2010; Bhaumik, 2012; N. Goswami, 2014).

Migration has always been a sensitive issue in Assam, especially in relation to the Muslims of East Bengali origin. The redrawing of political boundaries after the British withdrew in 1947 created India and Pakistan. East Bengal (parts of which were administered in conjunction with British Assam) became East Pakistan and, in 1971, the independent country of Bangladesh. The Muslims of East Bengali origin moved within British India, from East Bengal to Assam, in the nineteenth century (U. Goswami, 2014, 75–76). Propelled by political disturbances and climate disasters, their in-migration continued in postcolonial times in the absence of regulated borders and effective immigration laws. As competition over limited resources and livelihood escalated, fears of demographic swamping and the loss of language and religion entered the mix, triggering a mass civil-disobedience movement known as the Assam Andolan (1979–1985) (U. Goswami, 2014, 6).

In contemporary conversations relating to Assam’s many incidents of violence against this migrant community, however, this complex history of

arbitrary map-making, colonial and post-colonial state-building, and human suffering is often overlooked, as are the realities of post-insurgency politics. Instead, a binary narrative of Hindu versus Muslim, indigenous versus settler/migrant is superimposed, depending on who is telling the story and for whom: increasingly, in recent years, reports and analyses aimed at mainland and international audiences are emphasizing the communal/religious overtones of the Bodo-immigrant conflict rather than the ethno-nationalist nuances of it (Naqvi, 2021; Press Trust of India, 2021). Such a reductionist approach, of course, makes the conflicts manageable for those in the centers of power, both on the mainland and in the periphery. It also allows dichotomic, polarizing forces – like that of the Hindutva ideology from the mainland – to consolidate in Assam.

Unless these polarizing processes and structures are dismantled, the possibility of conflict escalation remains alive. A gendered understanding can help connect specific manifestations of hypermasculinist violence to the larger structures that perpetuate core–periphery dichotomies. It is important to identify these hegemonic masculinist systems and structures that thrive on keeping violence and conflicts alive, and to recognize the vertical patterns of power and domination that they help sustain and replicate at multiple levels and in multiple guises. Addressing these patterns alone can help conflict-habituated societies like Assam break out of the interminable cycle of violence.

### ***Multiple Centers and Moving Margins***

In recognizing the vertical operations of hegemonic power structures, however, it is equally important to understand that the centers and margins of power are not static, but shifting and relational. Especially in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural locations like Assam, positions of centrality and marginality are flexible and always in flux. In the South African context, the examination of “circulation, interconnections and circularities” led Nyamnjoh and Brudvig (2016, 2) to argue that marginality is not a permanent condition nor is it the exclusive preserve of any one community, culture, place, gender, or generation. There are no “permanent victors or permanent victims” just as no single entity, individual or institution, has monopoly of force or subservience (*ibid.*).

The need, then, is to identify the hegemonic structures that perpetuate both systemic and contingent marginality. In their conceptual taxonomy of marginality, Mehretu et al. (2000, 91) describe systemic marginality as “a socially constructed system of inequitable relations within a hegemonic order that allows one set of individuals and communities to exercise undue power and control over another set.” In contrast, contingent marginality is “a condition that results from competitive inequality.” Contingent marginality “may persist and become a chronic distress” (Mehretu et al., 2000, 90), but systemic marginalization “is a deliberate social construction by the dominant class to

achieve specific desirable outcomes of political control, social exclusion and economic exploitation" (Mehrebu et al., 2000, 92). If systemic marginalization is evident in Assam's conflictual relationship with the core/mainland, both systemic inequity and competitive inequality between the marginalized entities of the periphery have caused horizontal, intractable conflicts.

Viewed from the mainland,<sup>4</sup> the Northeast as a whole is the periphery: a part, and yet, apart from the rest of the nation. Within the region, though, Assam was shaped as the center of power ever since the British colonial rulers constructed it as a province. They brought under its administrative ambit the small and big principalities and kingdoms that governed the disparate pre-colonial indigenous and autochthonous<sup>5</sup> communities. Having entered the region nearly a century after they colonized the Indian mainland, they shaped it as an appendage, a hinterland to the Indian heartland. Assam – and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura – were thus reimagined as a periphery: the furthest corner of the colonizer's vast Indian territory.

In this periphery, as the community of people who most closely resembled their Indian subjects, the British administrators turned to the dominant Axamiyā Hindu autochthons to represent all the other communities of Assam. The Axamiyā-speaking community practiced the same religion (Hinduism) as the majority on the mainland – albeit differently<sup>6</sup> – and its elites “travelled to Calcutta or other parts of British India for Western higher education and claimed descent from Brahmin families in Kanauj and other places of mainland India” (U. Goswami, 2014, 54). This sense of affinity with the mainland also ensured that when the colonizers were withdrawing from India, the political and civil leadership – drawn mostly from this same community – opted to join the Indian Union.

They were, however, conscious of being a “small people” in the “great Indian nation” (my translation, Bhagabati, 1998, 36). In order to forge a distinctive identity, then, and to prove themselves an “energising factor in India’s civilization” (Bhuyan, 1960, 185), they called upon the “non-Aryan” “primitive tribes,” to join them in the enterprise (Bhuyan, 1960, 56). By weaving together the “twin threads of Aryan and non-Aryan culture,” they hoped to offer up the Axamiya as a sub-nation of the great Indian nation, one that was “a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1984, 126).

Meanwhile, within the periphery, the “tribals (who) live in the plains” were seen as detribalizing and gradually assimilating with “the population of the plains” (G.N. Bardoloi, 1947). The indigenous populations<sup>7</sup> of the hills, however, still held on to the “distinct features of their way of life” (*ibid.*). Their “evolution” toward assimilation, it was believed, “should come as far as possible from the tribe itself but it is equally clear that contact with outside influences is necessary though not in a compelling way” (*ibid.*). To this end, the report submitted by the “Sub-Committee on North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas” to the “Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities, Tribal Areas, etc.,” in the Constituent Assembly of India in 1947,

advocated the inclusion of the Sixth Schedule in the Indian Constitution to create autonomous councils for the indigenous peoples of the hills (*ibid.*).

Leaders of some indigenous communities of the hills and plains – J.J.M. Nichols-Roy and Rup Nath Brahma representing the Khasis of the hills and Bodos of the plains respectively – were active members of this sub-committee. The sub-committee also traveled through the indigenous areas of the Northeast and consulted the leaders of several tribes. It was during this process that the Mizo Union opted to join the Indian State. Many indigenous leaders, thus, aligned themselves with the Axamiyā leadership of the time to lead their communities in giving a chance to the project of putting together the Indian nation-state. This is not to say that there were no divergent views: for instance, while a section of the Naga leaders opted to join India, the Naga National Council (NNC) declared Nagaland an independent nation a day before India's Independence Day.

All in all, at the time when the Northeast was being yoked to India, there were distinctive and even opposing ways in which the multiple peripheries within the Northeast periphery negotiated and interacted with, and responded to, the hegemony of the Indian State on the mainland and that of the dominant Axamiyā leadership in Assam. Negotiations for centrality continued within the marginalized communities themselves: some sections joined the Indian Union in 1947, and others asserted their independence immediately (like the NNC in 1947) or declared their separatism in subsequent years (like the MNF in 1966).

The dominant Axamiyā, meanwhile, established themselves at the center of the periphery by aligning themselves with the hegemony of the mainlanders, while at the same time, self-constructing as the benign patriarchs at the top of the periphery's ethnic hierarchy. Soon, though, their centrality was contested; ethnic fragmentations and fissures between communities became apparent. With the emergence and gradual intensification of the postcolonial competition “over new strategic positions of power: places of employment, taxation, funds for development, education, political positions, and so on” (Cohen, 1969, 199), the peripheries within the periphery started re-negotiating with the multiple centers. The hill communities, like the Nagas and the Mizos, were among the first to start breaking away till the Northeast took on its current territorial contours.

Even as the marginalized constituents of the periphery were challenging the hegemony of the dominant Axamiyā-speaking community, these non-indigenous autochthons were also forced to raise allegations of “step-motherly” treatment by the mainland (Barpujari, 1998, 80). As Assam started breaking down into the constituent states of the Northeast, demands for statehood and stronger autonomous arrangements proliferated among the indigenous communities. A deliberate policy of “balkanization of Assam” (Barpujari, 1998, 106) was suspected. The State’s tacit and not-so-tacit encouragement of the influx of immigrants was upsetting the existing demographic balance. Discontent also brewed over the “exploitation of resources

by taking out raw materials to feed industries elsewhere" and "employment of outsiders[,] specially in key-posts[,] and total neglect of development in transport, communication, power, education and social services" (Barpujari, 1998, 80). A "sense of alienation bred by geographical isolation, communication gap and above all prolonged neglect and indifference of the Union government" (Barpujari, 1998, v–vi) simmered for a few decades till, in 1979, the six-year-long Assam Andolan broke out.

Initially, all indigenous and autochthonous peoples of Assam participated in the Andolan since they were equally affected and discontented as the dominant community. However, the dominant Axamiyā-Hindu community failed to take into consideration the ethnic aspirations of these communities or the rights of the migrant peoples. The "sons of the soil" ideology that propelled the Andolan excluded both documented and undocumented migrants. In certain pockets, the purportedly non-violent movement turned violent against them; some attacks also took place against members of autochthonous indigenous and ethnic communities. Already, a sense of alienation among the indigenous communities was growing in the face of a long history of cultural and structural violences they were subjected to by the dominant community. Allegations of internal colonization surfaced: the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) alleged in 1987 that the "Assamese community has captured Assam and its administration and now dominating (*sic*) the once master-ruler of Assam – the Kacharis – the Bodos. The outsider Assamese has unjustifiably overthrown the original master Kacharis!" (ABSU, 1987). Immediately after the Assam Andolan, the marginalized communities of Assam rose in rebellion against the Axamiyā-speaking political leadership. On the north banks of the Brahmaputra, the Bodo people started demanding a separate state since 1987. The rest of the Northeast was also seething: the insurrection in the Mizo Hills ended with the creation of the state of Mizoram. Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh also formed new states.

Evidently then, the interconnections and interrelations between the peripheral communities mutate as much as those between the periphery and the core. Consequently, power circulates constantly; the components of this network are all "in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (Foucault, 1980, 98). Such agency is often overlooked. In imposing peace from above, existing conflict resolution approaches rarely appreciate this kind of power which is "a kind of circulating, capillary network of relations that pervades all levels of society" (Urban, 2008, 503). Consequently, in centralizing their peacemaking efforts, they end up replicating the conditions of conflict. One of the primary conditions of conflict is the "need for centralization, for the tight pulling together of all elements, which alone guarantees their use, without loss of energy and time" (Simmel, 1955, 63). Peace, on the other hand, needs to be a "letting go"; a condition similar to when the "forces and interests" of an individual's nature can be "allowed to develop in various directions and independently of one another" (Simmel, 1955, 63). Therefore,

for peace in societies experiencing intractable conflict, there must be a willingness to break the constant pulls of “power over” and to develop an appreciation for “power with.”

### ***Power in the Periphery***

Making the shift from long-term conditioning toward “power over” to appreciating the advantages of “power with” requires dismantling the tools used by patriarchal structures, however benign and benevolent their manifestation. In intractable conflict societies like Assam, this entails critically examining existing peacebuilding mechanisms and questioning the motives and compulsions behind political processes of reconciliation and reconstruction. Thus, the power-sharing arrangements between the periphery’s many marginalized constituencies should be reassessed for their conflict-mitigating potential. Simultaneously, the apparent transformations effected by conflicts must be scrutinized for their potential contribution toward dismantling patriarchal structures and ending hyper-masculinist violence.

Social and political conflicts – the kind that Assam has experienced – have been studied in existing peace and conflict literature for their potential to contribute as “life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships” (Lederach, 2014, 17). To envision and respond to conflicts in this capacity is to take a transformational approach that goes beyond the traditional response to conflicts as events to be managed or immediate problems to be resolved. Rather, conflict transformation views conflict as “a normal and continuous dynamic within human relationships” embedded in “broader patterns and issues” (*ibid.*). This is not to say that conflict does not result in “long-standing cycles of hurt and destruction”; rather, in revising the existing conceptual view of conflict as a negative and destructive force alone, conflict transformation encourages “a capacity to envision conflict positively, as a natural phenomenon that creates potential for constructive growth” while prescribing “a willingness to respond in ways that maximize this potential for positive change” (*ibid.*).

In order to work toward peace, these positive changes need to be highlighted and foregrounded. But these transformations have not been studied adequately in Assam and the Northeast. Overwhelmingly, the literature on conflict transformation here looks at changes that have occurred in the nature, trajectory, and intensity of violent conflicts (Routray, 2011; Chandran, 2020). The very slim scholarship on positive transformations highlights the changes from more robust political power-sharing mechanisms and redistribution of resources to the creation of new economic niches and changes in popular and political cultures as well as a readjustment of civil–military relations (U. Goswami, 2017). It does not, however, put these transformations in context of the post-insurgency mutations of gendered violence as discussed in the preceding sections. A more robust discussion of the deep-seated relation between

conflict transformations and the possibility of organic, engendered peace is required. This book aims to fill that gap.

Thus, a deeper scrutiny of the post-insurgency political mechanisms of power-sharing and devolution reveals how they are engineered and executed to create wider horizontal gaps, between and within the constituents of the periphery. For one, these instruments of autonomy and self-governance leave much scope for newer, violent confrontations between communities. The Karbis and the Dimasas were granted autonomous councils in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution at its very inception. The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) have been functional since 1952. However, in 2003, the Schedule was amended in response to the Bodo Movement and the BTAD was formed. The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), which governed the BTAD, was invested with more powers by this amendment than that granted to the KAAC and NCHAC (now known as the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council). This led to a renewed demand for more substantial autonomy – and subsequent violence – in the twin hill districts that housed these councils.

Trouble also resurfaced when six other communities of Assam were granted non-statutory autonomous councils after the Bodo Movement: Tiwa, Rabha, Deori, Mising, Thengal Kachari, and Sonowal Kachari. M. S. Prabhakara (2005) likened the process of creation of these councils to a “fast-food” style of politics involving finding quick-fix solutions to ethnic problems. This “mechanical autonomisation” led to “inescapable atomization” (*ibid.*). Whether we look at it as a botched attempt at addressing ethnic aspirations before they turned manifestly violent, or as an effort to co-opt the ethnic elites through financial largesse and cosmetic political changes, the fact remains that this move induced more ethnic fragmentation and violent outbreaks; armed and unarmed political movements within these communities pushed for greater autonomy and more power. Meanwhile, the influx of large amounts of financial grants and sops to these autonomous councils created ethnic elites who are distanced from the larger sections of their own respective communities. The State’s approach to these autonomous councils as well their internal functioning, therefore, contradicts the basic principle behind autonomy: “Autonomy is not established for the sake of privileges, but has to be built on the principles of equality and non-discrimination” (Benedikter, 2007, 3).

The in-flow of large financial packages and huge amounts of unaccounted-for counter-insurgency money into the conflict zone cultivated among the people a penchant for easy money, deflecting their attention from the conflicts. In war/conflict economies like Assam’s “short-term income” is “readily obtainable ... even if war destroys future prospects” (Murshed, 2008, 377). Government policies aimed at energizing the economy and enabling entrepreneurship are ignoring this social reality; in practice, they are creating complicit civilians without real empowerment. Many subsidies and incentives are made available to micro, small, and medium enterprises under successive

industrial and investment policies. Field interviews and observations have revealed, however, that a number of dud industrial units have cropped up in Assam for the sole purpose of acquiring these subsidies that call for little or no accountability of expenses.

Conflict transformation and a desire for rebuilding the conflict-ravaged economy are evident, however, in a growing number of private individuals who are creating new economic niches in the post-insurgency reality and establishing peace businesses (field observations and interviews). Peace businesses, as understood in current literature, are “business models based on the principles of nonviolence, social justice and ecological sustainability” (Santa-Barbara, 2007a, 233). For instance, as alternatives to private sector/corporate or government jobs, some young entrepreneurs are developing new farming practices: small-holder owned organic tea plantations, for example, are challenging the monopoly of large tea companies that thrived on underpaid labor and environmentally unsustainable practices (field observations and interviews). And in many instances, these peace businesses are owned and run by women who were affected by the violence of the peak conflict years.

In 2007, in the oil- and coal-rich Geleky town of Assam’s Sivasagar district, two persons were shot dead and another injured on suspicion of being insurgents by personnel of the Central Industrial Security Forces (CISF) who were guarding the oil installations on the Assam-Nagaland border; the CISF is not involved in counter-insurgency operations (Telegraph Bureau, 2007). Among the dead was local businessman Nilikesh Gogoi. Nilikesh’s death left his wife Kunti Rani Borah Gogoi with a four-year-old son and the responsibility of looking after his entire family. In our conversations, Kunti revealed the hardships she had to face, having never had to work for a living before. Today, though, she manages the successful Adarsha Bidyapith Secondary School and owns her own small tea plantation in Geleky besides being the proud mother of a grown son. Her peace entrepreneurship has made a difference to her own family and to the lives of the people in the region (field interviews and observations).

Meanwhile, there is evidence of a subconscious peace culture and efforts at ethnic reconciliation in literature and scholarship, in contemporary arts and culture, as well as in popular imagination and day-to-day living. Writers, scholars, and journalists like Arupa Patangia Kalita, Ratna Bharali Talukdar, Aparna Goswami, Anju Bodo, Rakhee Kalita Moral, Jahnavi Barua, and Uddipana Goswami are reimagining/reframing conflicts and women’s roles in them (T. Misra, 2010); singers like Zubilee Baruah and bands like the Hurricane Girls are fusing ethnic melodies and reviving traditional music (U. Goswami, 2017). Cross-cultural exchanges are also taking place in “festivals” like the Dehing Patkai and Brahmaputra Beach festivals, which are organized through state patronage or part-sponsorship. These festivals allow the participating communities to perform their identities through showcasing their food, drinks, dress, jewelry, dance, and other elements of culture.

Such festivals and performances are especially possible in the post-insurgency environment when politically neutral spaces have emerged (Longkumer, 2015, 55). Like the annual Hornbill Festival of Nagaland, these festivals of Assam permit the local ethnic communities “to articulate their histories, produce a certain image for external consumption, and participate in the production of their own image” (Longkumer, 2015, 52).<sup>8</sup> This agency should be studied from a paracolonial perspective in conflict societies where pre-colonial ethnic identities are constantly being shaped and reshaped in response to postcolonial hegemonies. Sometimes, as in the case of the Nagas, these identity transformations are a means to end conflict as a result of “the exhaustion of strength, which can simply place the desire for peace beside the continuing desire to fight” (Simmel, 1955, 80): the Naga struggle for independence is at a stalemate: negotiations between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)-led independentist movement have been ongoing since 1995 (South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d.).

From time to time, the peripheral peoples of Assam have also attempted to redefine collective identities to counter the hegemony of the center. Thus, at the 44th annual conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), or the Bodo Literary Forum, former Assam Minister G. C. Langthasa, who belongs to the Dimasa community that has close ethno-cultural, literary, and historical ties with the Bodo community, said: “I am proud today that the Dimasas, the Boros, the Boroks from Tripura and Bangladesh, Boros [Meche] from Nepal have congregated in one platform here, and we talk of coming under the same fold” (*The Sentinel*, 2005).

Juxtaposing the exploration of post-colonial identity reconstruction with an examination of traditional practices of boundary crossing and ethnic passing can hold the key to transcending the incompatibilities that informed violent conflicts while moving toward a new, peaceful reality. Like many African communities, historically, indigenous and autochthonous communities of Assam have also allowed for identities to be negotiated and transformed through marriage, linguistic and religious assimilation, and other means. There are, of course, questions of equal rights and hierarchies of power inherent in these processes (Hilgers, 2011, 49–50), but they beg deeper scholarship, especially in multi-ethnic conflict societies where “actors themselves … speak as if ethnic boundaries are clear-cut and defined for all time” (Tambiah, 1989, 335). Highlighting such practices in fluidity and identity reconstruction can open up conversations about ethnic reconciliation.

Transformations in the relationships between peripheries and those between the periphery and the center are required for organic peace. However, these reconciliations need to be scrutinized for their sustainability and ability to contribute to authentic, organic peace. For example, civil–military relationships in Assam have taken more than a cordial turn in recent times. My generation grew up in the 1990s fearing men in uniforms: two of the biggest military operations in post-independent India – Operation Rhino and Operation

Bajrang – were conducted in those years. As a military organization that is not traditionally schooled in asymmetric warfare, the Indian Army lacked the capacity to fight “below (its) own potential” (Olivetta, 2008, 45) and caused much collateral damage; the war spilled over into the civilian domain.

In those years, every family in Assam knew or was related to someone who had been subjected to military excesses. With laws like the AFSPA granting them impunity, the Indian armed forces were brutalized and made barbaric. As discussed in the introduction, young girls – even in urban areas where active combat rarely took place – were cautioned against looking up at passing military trucks for fear of inviting rape and sexual harassment. Walking home from school, we endured lewd comments and catcalls from the soldiers we passed. Young boys were harassed and beaten up simply for being out on the streets: anecdotal evidence abounds, and many such incidents are also documented in the literature of witness from the Northeast.

Subsequent attempts at perception management and a conscious strategy of public diplomacy, however, drastically turned the narrative around. In 2004, the Indian Army’s Training Command released its doctrine of “Winning the Hearts and Minds” (WHAM) of the people in Northeast India and Jammu and Kashmir – India’s other border conflict zone (S. Dutta, 2004). It recommended “a transformation in strategic thinking along with a paradigm shift in organisation and conduct of operations” through “low-profile” and “people-friendly” operations. The Army has since devised elaborate Military Civic Action programs aimed at WHAM. These programs involving “a wide range of activities across the entire spectrum of development … demonstrate the ‘humane face’ of the soldier,” and are implemented under Operations Sadbhavana (Goodwill) and Samaritan (V. Singh, 2013).

The success of this approach is such that large numbers of youths from Assam are joining the Indian military and para-military forces; as a senior journalist puts it: “Yesterday’s security concerns have become today’s security personnel” (Kashyap, 2015). The Indian State has also moved away from its dependence on “archaic military solutions” (Barbora, 2006), and civil-military relations have been mended. But even as this is hailed as a bridging of the gap between the mainland and the periphery, it is important to analyze the relative roles of self-selection and organizational socialization in this process (Trainor, 2008). In the context of Assam and the Northeast, it would be especially interesting to explore that component of socialization (or the making of the “organization man”) by which new values are communicated, accepted/legitimized, and finally internalized (*ibid.*). This could be a significant area of future research.

Subjected to the barbarism of the Indian armed forces not too far back in history, the “organization man” from Assam, therefore, replicates the same brutality. In 2017, Major Leetul Gogoi – an Axamiyā officer of the Indian Army engaged in counter-insurgency operations in Jammu and Kashmir – tied to the front of his jeep a civilian who had gone to cast his vote in the Parliamentary elections in Kashmir. He then paraded the man around the

village and sounded warnings over loudspeakers against protesters. Major Gogoi was not only exonerated from charges of human rights violation, but was also issued a commendation by India's Chief of Army Staff (Chakravarty, 2017). Ironically, he was court-martialed in 2019 when found guilty of "fraternising" with an 18-year-old local girl in 2018 and "being away from the place of duty while in operational area" (Press Trust of India, 2019). The girl's mother alleged that the Major had raided their house twice at night (*Express News Service*, 2018).

Official and unofficial raids/searches by armed personnel, threats and acts of sexual harassment against local women, and a general attitude of machismo characterized the Indian Army's counterinsurgency operations in Assam in the 1980s and 1990s as well. Major Gogoi illustrates how the hyper-masculinist violence and barbarism inflicted upon the people of Assam were legitimized and internalized. Occasionally, the local independent media reports sporadic incidents of the Army's continued atrocities against civilians (Terang, 2019). But for the most part, a collective amnesia of the conflict years has settled in. People have forgotten the barbarism that legitimized "violation of the laws of war in pursuit of a military or political objective" or the "depredations against noncombatants (viz., rape, murder, and torture)" (Arreguin-Toft, 2001, 101). After all, barbarism is a conscious strategy of war developed "to destroy an adversary's will and capacity to fight" (*ibid.*).

Of course, to establish absolute dominance in this way, hierarchical structures "depend on and operate through more local low-level 'capillary' circuits of power relationship" (Gordon, 2001, xxiv–xxv). All attempts at co-option, perception management, and creation of the "organization man" are futile without local actors and agents. Thus, the relationship of dominance and dependency between the core and the periphery is not unidirectional. When conflict-habituated societies come to understand power thus – as "a more diffuse, decentralised and omnipresent phenomenon" (Urban, 2008, 505) – they can effectively challenge the hegemony of the power centers by rethinking their own responses to and relationships with them.

### ***Engendered Peace***

Redefining existing relationships to hegemonic power structures necessarily entails transcending conflicts and creating a new empirical reality (Galtung, 2004). In this new reality, peace processes must be bottom-up and centered around the communities in conflict (Paffenholz, 2003). Peace as an absence of direct violence between former parties in conflict – as seen in post-insurgency Assam – cannot break the cycle of violence. Rather, violence mutates and finds alternate victims while gendered, hierarchical relations of domination and subjugation replicate themselves in different ways. To achieve organic peace (characterized by peace as a way of life, rather than an absence of conflict) it is essential to dismantle these patriarchal structures, and that can only happen from within. Peace processes, therefore, need to be civilian-led,

community-based, and engendered: they must involve the people affected by conflicts; incorporate the interests of the marginalized constituencies (including women) within the context of the conflicts; and be based on a larger understanding of power relations and operations of patriarchal structures that inform violence and conflicts at various levels.

Since they are voluntary, collective, and centered around “shared interests, purposes and values” (Fischer, 2006, 4), such civilian-led processes are more likely to foster organic peace. And because they are “separate from the state and enjoy autonomy from the state” (G. White 2004, 10), they are more likely to prioritize the interests of the people and the community, healing and strengthening them from within. In protracted conflict situations like Assam’s, these civilian actors are forced to work amidst “shrinking and closing spaces” which means

that their work is subject to legal and bureaucratic constraints, such as antiterror laws and restrictive NGO legislation, surveillance, the freezing of project bank accounts, and work and travel bans, but may also be impacted by public defamation and stigmatisation, intimidation and criminalisation, even including threats to personal safety, arrest and murder.

(Justen and Rolf, 2018, 1)

Often, they are also “fragmented along conflict lines” (*ibid.*). In the absence of “legitimacy, trust, pluralism and inclusion” (Justen and Rolf, 2018, 4), peace does not sustain.

A similar situation prevails in Assam. Despite organized engagement by certain sections of the communities, a cohesive and sustained community-based peace effort has been missing. In addressing the conflict between the ULFA and the Government of India, the dominant Axamiyā community organized itself on several occasions: in the early 1990s under the initiative of Asom Ganatantrik Nagarik Sangstha, from 2005–2006 around the People’s Consultative Group (PCG), and most recently, since 2010, under the umbrella of the Sanmilita Jatiya Abhibarttan (SJA) (A. R. Dutta, 2021, 48). To some extent, the SJA “represents the broader and composite society in Assam” (A. R. Dutta, 2021, 44), given that the Axamiyā identity itself is composite and interethnic, created through the synergy of the various indigenous and autochthonous communities inhabiting Assam.<sup>9</sup> The SJA – literally the United National Convention – is one of the many such national conventions that have come together in the post-insurgency period in Assam’s civil society space to facilitate peace talks between the insurgent groups and the government, or to rethink the ethnic aspirations and democratic demands of the communities that are weary of getting caught in the violence between the State and non-State actors. Some indigenous groups have also formed community-specific civilian organizations to rethink conflict, like the Koch Rajbongshi National Convention and the Bodo National Convention.

Despite the long history of conflict and counter-insurgency that led to shrinking and closing spaces, the potential for civilian-led protest as well as peace movements exists in Assam. From the six-year-long Assam Andolan to the spontaneous protest movement against the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill (CAB) – which subsequently became the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA) – the state has seen various organizations in the non-State<sup>10</sup> space demanding that the government not act against the interests of its own people. The difference between the Assam Andolan and the anti-CAB/CAA movement was that while the Andolan sustained for six years, the anti-CAB/CAA movement lasted only a few months and was easily co-opted, coming as it did in the post-insurgency environment.

To develop this potential, then, and to build a strong civilian movement that can work toward organic peace, Assam's many national conventions must reflect on the hegemonic forces that are keeping ethnic fissures active and perpetuating violence in different guises. An engendered understanding of these forces alone can help them question assertions of peace promised through signing ceasefire agreements and treaties with rebel factions and community organizations (DHNS, 2021; India Today Web Desk, 2020). Such *ad hoc* instruments of peace keep the potential for conflicts alive because they do not dismantle the power structures that fragment society hierarchically. Civil society organizations must recognize that such pronouncements of peace only serve “the deflection of interest from conflict to a higher object” (Simmel, 1955, 80). Meanwhile, the culture of impunity and violence sustains, society remains brutalized, and the monopoly of violence returns to the State, its agents, and cronies.

Civic peace engagement must necessarily involve the academia, media, public intellectuals, and writers who are able to identify the tools used toward this end. One such tool is fear. Nussbaum (2018, 2) illustrates how the rhetoric of fear and narrative of victimization are used to foster hatred and violence between communities. Hate and fear are closely related sentiments, especially at the intergroup level. In America, they were used to divert people's attention away from the uncertainties and difficulties they face. “Useful analysis” was replaced by “aggressive ‘othering’ strategies” that gave Americans villains to grasp after, keep out, and keep in place, reinforcing masculine pride (*ibid.*). Such pride and aggression can manifest as seemingly harmless acts of xenophobia and racism like using pejorative language: this is a way of life in Assam today. It can also translate into inhuman and dehumanizing acts, like an incident in September 2021 where a Muslim man of East Bengali origin was shot at by armed police during a forced eviction drive from government land; the official government photographer was filmed stomping on the man as he lay on the ground dying (Pratidin Bureau, 2021).

Since violence is internalized as acceptable behavior in conflict-habituated societies like Assam, it is important to recognize how polarizing political rhetoric inspires it through provoking shared negative emotions of contempt, anger, and revenge against certain communities. People's attention,

meanwhile, is diverted from the fissures within and from the everyday problems of governance and unmet basic human needs. To counter these tools of hegemonic control, communities in conflict must reflect on the long history of conflict, violence, marginalization, and colonialization. They must recognize and introspect why they are incapable of standing in solidarity with their neighboring communities who are also victims of the same history. To this end, they must confront their own complicities and hold themselves accountable as perpetrators: that is the only way to heal collectively and move past the shared experience of victimhood toward reconciliation. Reconciliation begins with a “restoration of a state of peace to the relationship, where the entities are at least not harming each other, and can begin to be trusted not to do so in future, which means that revenge is foregone as an option” (Santa-Barbara, 2007b, 174).

Reconciliation alone can guarantee the success of formal and public instruments of post-conflict reconstruction. For example, truth-telling mechanisms have contributed immensely in paving the way to peaceful coexistence by healing individual victims and exposing intuitional and structural injustices. They have also, at the same time, been critically examined for the dangers they pose in multi-ethnic, conflict-habituated societies where they may end up creating scapegoats of individual perpetrators named in the truth-telling processes. This is likely to provoke retributive urges, especially in a fragmented society with unreconciled differences like Assam’s. Where hegemonic ambitions inform these mechanisms, they could also divert attention from pressing questions about collective responsibility (Mendeloff, 2004).

As they undertake to redefine their nationalist and ethno-nationalist goals in the post-insurgency period, civil society organizations of Assam must guard against selective truths and “alternative facts” while reflecting on their collective history of violence and hate. They also need to challenge and change the hypermasculinist, apathetic systems of governance that erode compassion and prevent communities from standing together in sisterhood and solidarity. Such civilian-led peace efforts must insist that successive governments do not focus entirely on power, security, and order; instead, they must push for humane policies that are essential to ensure human security.

Such policies formulated to ensure the security of all sections of the people – indigenous, autochthonous, or migrant; citizen, non-citizen, or stateless alike – also have a crucial role to play in State security, especially in a geopolitically sensitive region like Assam (and the Northeast as a whole) where the communities share historically significant and sustained transborder connections. To continue with the example of the Muslims of East Bengali origin, reports of the recent incidents of violence against the community has inspired a narrative – both on the Indian mainland and in the rest of the world – of anti-Muslim politics and polemics in Assam (Naqvi, 2021; Press Trust of India, 2021). While this does not encompass the comprehensive on-ground realities as discussed above, it does have the potential to turn global hate toward Assam and make it vulnerable to external threats, such as that

of pan-Islamic radicalism. Compassion toward marginalized communities and policies that alleviate their sufferings can overturn such narratives and counter these threats.

### **Assam and Asian Peripheries**

There is every possibility that the conflicts and violence in Assam may connect to global networks of terror. Already in neighboring Bangladesh, radical Islamists have built an entire ecosystem that enjoyed the patronage of the former government and indulged in terrorist activities. Although they have been largely enervated after the current government cracked down on them since 2016, fears that they will reactivate their networks have resurfaced following the Taliban's 2021 takeover of Kabul and their call to war (Bhaumik, 2021). As reports surface of a few Bangladeshi individuals being detained in India while trying to reach Afghanistan (*ibid.*), the ruling right-wing government in India would be prudent to refrain from fanning anti-Muslim sentiments in the peripheral regions.

Despite decades of being racialized and othered, the Muslims of East Bengali origin in Assam have consistently declared themselves as Axamiyā-speaking during census enumerations, and participated in the social, cultural, and literary life of the people (U. Misra, 1999). But constantly being questioned about their belongingness and loyalties can help the forces of radicalism proliferate among them. Already reeling from decades of intra-State violence, the devastation that terror on a global scale can wreak on Assam and the Northeast will impact the mainland as well. The Indian State must, therefore, rethink its hegemonic approach to the region and actively work toward dismantling the hypermasculinist power structures that govern and guide inter-community relationships in the region. This is as much an imperative of State security as it is of stability in the region where the three Asias – South, East, and Southeast – meet.

### ***Peace in the Peripheries***

So far, international intervention in the region has been officially contained by the Indian State, which has maintained there is no “armed conflict” within Indian territory: “Official India appears to associate the term armed conflict with regimes of external intervention: the meddling in the internal affairs of states by foreign governments and nongovernmental humanitarian and human rights organizations” (Baruah, 2020a, 10). However, the rise and sustenance of insurgency movements in Northeast India has always indicated the presence of the “foreign hand”: Burma's Kachin Independence Army (KIA) trained insurgent armies based in Nagaland, Assam, and Manipur. Pakistan, China, and Bangladesh also “aided and abetted rebel groups from North East as part of a deliberate design to destabilize India's frontier regions” (Bhaumik, 2009, 153). In its turn, India has also “used this strategic frontier region to

support insurrections in neighbouring countries. During the Bangladesh liberation war, India trained thousands of Bengali guerrillas to fight Pakistani forces in the camps of Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam" (Bhaumik, 2009, 154).

Such plausibly deniable State-level interventions in this transborder region are possible because of interconnected on-ground networks that defy the solidity of territorial boundaries and borders as depicted in cartographic renderings. Meanwhile, unregulated borders – and the absence of humane immigration laws – fail to effectively address cross-border population movement that is often propelled by political disturbances and climate disasters. Frequently – as with the influx of refugees to Mizoram since the February 2021 military coup in Burma – such movements create friction between the center and the peripheral states. The center "asked the north-eastern states of Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland to maintain strict vigil to prevent the influx of people from across the border" (Firstpost Staff, 2021). However, Mizoram sheltered them as it shares a 510-km-long boundary with Burma's Chin state, and Mizo people consider the Chin their ethnic kin (E. Roy, 2021).

Before colonial history fractured the ties, for millennia, commonalities of "ecological features," shared "routes of trade and migration, and the lifestyles" besides "exchanges of cultural influences and genes" had connected the people who lived "on the fringes of the Eastern Himalayas, parts of Southeast Asia, the eastern edge of South Asia, and the northern borders of East Asia" (Bender, 2017, 1). Despite colonial and pre-colonial ruptures and interruptions, paracolonial ties between transborder communities like the Dai (Tai), Wa (Va), Jingpo (Kachin), and Chin (Kuki) of Northeast India, China, and Burma endured. Recent scholarship into these "geographies of ignorance" (van Schendel, 2002) have uncovered the shared experiences of peoples placed on the margins of their respective postcolonial nation-states, who were "subsumed within larger geopolitical constructs that include East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia" (Bender, 2017, xvii). Their parallel histories and cultural experiences "caused by war, insurrection, terrorism, sexual violence, ethnic conflict, and racial prejudice" (Bender, 2017, 90) are also being studied. Such uncovering of global interconnectedness of transborder continuities and contiguities underscores the imperative for the State to expand its vision beyond the hegemonic control of the border regions. By readjusting its approach to the Northeast, India can also inspire peacemaking in the entire volatile transborder region. Peace here is not just a necessity for the people of the margins; it can also prove equally beneficial to the respective centers.

### ***Northeast in the Asian Century***

In a region where the mega States of India and China are constantly in competition over political control, resource extraction, and military dominance – through covert or overt means – peace and stability may seem impossible. However, without inclusive peace for the communities of the region, both

States remain locked in tactical contests and neither can move forward in what is being heralded as the “Asian Century” (Khanna, 2019). China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to connect “the world’s largest population centers in a constellation of commerce and cultural exchange – a new Silk Road era” (Khanna, 2019, 1). This “most significant diplomatic project of the twenty-first century” (Khanna, 2019, 2) is dependent on strategic connectivity and cooperation that can take the entire transborder region forward into the new, integrated Asian future. This new era of prosperity connecting the vast markets of the three Asias must necessarily leave the politics of the Cold War era behind, shed the Western imperatives of containment and balance of power, and emerge from the “historical narratives of animosity about their neighbors” (Khanna, 2019, 12). Instead, they will have to build solidarities and “complementarities”: “Fundamentally, Asians seek not conquest but respect. A sufficient degree of respect for one another’s interests is enough” (*ibid.*).

The margins will play a central role in the creation of this new geopolitical future. The very connectivities that currently make this region Asia’s largest “arc of instability” can turn the narrative around. An “arc of instability,” in international relations, refers to geographically contiguous States experiencing intra-State conflicts that have implications for domestic, regional, and international security. Originating in the defense thinking of the strategic community in 1990s Australia, it encompasses the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and South Pacific regions where “various forms of intra-state conflict – secessionist movements, civil wars, communal violence, and so on – have become an increasing threat to political stability and state security in many countries” (Reilly, 2002, 7). This formulation fails to take into account the interconnectedness of the Northeast Indian region with its immediate Southeast and East Asian neighbors as discussed above.

This interconnectedness, when reframed as a resource for the actualization of the Asian Century, can inspire the nation-states in this volatile geopolitical region to identify the critical linkages between peacebuilding, political settlements, constitutional changes, and economic development. The indigenous communities on these borderlands of the three Asias have, for decades, lived with extreme militarization that erodes human rights, and transborder insurgencies that destabilize the region’s security. Additionally, drugs, contraband, and weapons trafficking generate an illicit economy that benefits neither national governments nor local communities. To disincentivize this economy and inhibit violent ideologies, livelihood alternatives – such as drawing communities away from poppy cultivation and toward high-value agricultural practices – should be introduced. Economic resilience of the local communities as well as of the nation-states they belong to also depends on the success of the bilateral development projects financed by multilateral agencies and/or national governments in this transnational region. Without peace, however, these projects – such as India’s Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport project or China’s BRI – cannot succeed. To illustrate, if there is a military crackdown

on political resistance in Burma's Chin state, the disturbance spills over into India's Mizoram. India is drawn into helping the Burmese Army, and this incites insurgent groups like the Arakan Army to disrupt the bilateral Kaladan project.

India can lead the way and provide a template for the nation-states of the neighborhood by adjusting its existing approach to peacebuilding in Assam and the Northeast. It can illustrate how a distant center of power can actualize disengagement and reconciliation in the margins by facilitating (not imposing) ethnic reconciliation, economic resilience, and political settlements at the community level. At the same time, it should be open to making constitutional changes and federal restructuring to accommodate ethno-nationalist aspirations if required. Most importantly, peace in the Northeast must involve bilateral policies that engage neighboring governments so that local communities on both sides of the border are involved. Building organic peace in Assam and the Northeast in this way is key to a peaceful and prosperous Asian future that is based on solidarity and connectivity.

## Notes

- 1 In December 2021, at the time of writing this book, 17 miners were killed by Indian Security Forces in Nagaland's Mon district on the mere suspicion of being insurgents (Kikon, 2021).
- 2 Organic peace derives from processes of peacebuilding that are “participatory and operate at precisely the community and local levels that top-down peace-making may fail to reach” (Mac Ginty, 2008, 158).
- 3 Full text available at: [https://mdoner.gov.in/contentimages/files/BTC\\_Accord.pdf](https://mdoner.gov.in/contentimages/files/BTC_Accord.pdf). Retrieved December 21, 2021.
- 4 This is not to assert that the mainland itself is a unified or homogenous entity: India is a multi-cultural, multi-linguistic country. However, the perception of the Northeast everywhere on the mainland seems to be one of uniformity. Racial persecution of people from the Northeast, based on this sense of shared “otherness” of the people of the periphery, has been reported from both the northern heartland of India as well as the southern states (Dev, 2017; Srivatsa and Kurup, 2012).
- 5 As in many African societies, in Assam, too, there exists a distinction between the “conqueror” and the “autochthon,” the “firstcomers” and “latecomers.” This categorization is “at the base of a hierarchy determining the distribution of rights, especially land rights, and access to resources” (Hilgers, 2011, 35–36).
- 6 The Hinduism practiced in Assam was observably different from that in the rest of India. Colonial literature – including travelogues and ethnographies – referred to “the laxity of morals amongst the people” and observed how “in religion, the Assamese affect Hindooism, but … are lax in the observance of religious rites” (Cooper, 1873, 101).
- 7 I use the label “indigenous” and not “tribal” for the most part because tribal identities in India are dependent on administrative provisions under the Constitution. Because of the politics and problematics involved in including communities under the Scheduled Tribe category in the Constitution, certain indigenous communities remain excluded from the protective discrimination provisions that such scheduling guarantees.

- 8 Longkumer (2015) bases his argument on Clifford's (1989, 75) discussion of how non-Western cultures negotiate with an interconnected world system by not "necessarily being swamped by it. Local structures produce *histories* rather than simply yielding to *History*."
- 9 For a detailed discussion of the interethnic Axamiyā identity, see Goswami, 2014, 44–67. Also see chapter 3.
- 10 Non-state actors refer to "private sector; economic and social partners, including trade union organisations; civil society in all its forms according to national characteristics" (African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, European Community and its Member States, 2018).

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## 2 Men in Margins

### Masculinity and Conflict

#### Introduction

The seven contiguous states of Northeast India – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura – are collectively referred to as “the land of the seven sisters.’ Coined in 1976,<sup>1</sup> this term has subsequently shaped the imaginary of the Northeast periphery on the Indian mainland in both popular parlance and the official discourse. The 1970s were a decade of tremendous upheaval in this periphery. The bloody Bangladesh Liberation War was being fought on its borders and often spilling over. Tripura’s role in the liberation war, for instance, has become legend: from sheltering war refugees to training *mukti joddhas* (liberation warriors), this small border state played a crucial role in facilitating the neighboring country’s secession from Pakistan and the realignment of power in the sub-continent (Deb, 2021). The massive exodus of refugees from Bangladesh as a result of the war led to internal unrest in the region, especially when the government on the Indian mainland appeared unwilling to address the issues of demographic swamping and resource alienation that the people of the region began to face as a consequence. Assam was the worst affected, and the people here responded with the Assam Andolan which lasted for six years, between 1979 and 1985.

The Andolan was a civil-disobedience movement of immense scale that put Assam on the global conflict map for the first time (Weiner, 1983). The movement, a protest from the periphery, forced the central government on the mainland to sit up and take notice. The covert and overt measures that the government took to address the uprising targeted the already-fragile ethnic fabric of this state, home to 115 communities according to the Anthropological Survey of India (B. K. Bardoloi and Athaparia, 2003). This set into motion a process of ethnic fragmentation; the dominant Axamiyā-speaking Hindu people who were providing leadership to the movement were alienated from the other communities of Assam. In the aftermath of the Movement, many ethnic groups, small and large, began to raise their own banners of revolt, mostly against the dominant community but also against the Indian State.

And for decades now, ethno-nationalist conflicts have continued and become endemic here.

The Indian State's response to the ongoing conflicts exhibits a lack of empathy for the ethnic aspirations and political demands of the people of Assam and the Northeast. Violence is usually the first response to dissent. Overtures for peaceful resolution are made only after brutal suppression have enervated the movements and made them amenable to political settlement on the State's terms (U. Goswami, 2014; Bhaumik, 2009). Thus, benign paternalism follows on the heels of an aggressively muscular approach. Meanwhile, prolonged exposure to State-sponsored violence – legal and extra-legal, lethal and extra-lethal – and the attendant disregard for human rights and civilian safety have legitimized violence in the region. Crimes against women and using sex as a weapon of war is commonplace. As a result, a culture of militarism has filtered into society and warlike, exaggerated machismo has become the norm. Society is criminalized and women, especially, bear the brunt of such criminalization (U. Goswami, 2010).

This chapter is motivated by my own experience of growing up in Assam during the peak of militancy and militarization of society. Enloe (2000, 3) defines militarization as “a step-by-step process by which a person or thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military *or* comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas.” I have observed, first-hand, the growth of an arrogant, andro-centric militarized culture in Assam. I also witnessed how militarization ties together political violence and criminalization of society. The changing structures and cultures of violence that directly impacted me, as a woman living in a conflict zone, spurred this study of how ethno-nationalist conflicts are intricately tied to growing machismo and changing ideas of masculinity and femininity. There is, however, no existing literature addressing this link in the Northeast itself. This chapter intends to fill that gap.

It starts by taking a close look at the tumultuous relationship that the Northeast periphery has shared with the mainland for most of India's post-independence history. Focusing mainly on the dominant Axamiyā-speaking Hindu community and the Bodo in Assam – but also occasionally referring to other communities and the relationships between them – the chapter analyzes what happens when disparate nationalities and sub-nationalities with varying levels and structures of patriarchal control collide in violent conflict. Its focus is twofold: the changing relationships between communities and the mutation in gender-based relations within the periphery. It links these changes to the reshaping of patriarchal structures in Assam in response to the superimposition of the newer, stronger patriarchies of the mainland: how the periphery's patriarchy collided and colluded with, and transformed through interaction with the mainland is of interest here.

As already mentioned, for most of India's post-independence history, this interaction has been conflictual and often violent. Relying heavily on postcolonial, pro-feminist masculinity studies for its analysis, therefore, this chapter links shifting gender and ethno-nationalist dynamics as they inform

and are, in turn, informed by violent intractable conflicts and militarism. By scrutinizing this link, the goal is to identify the obstacles toward building structures of equality, addressing which would help find pathways to peaceful coexistence.

## **Mainland Machismo**

Extant literature has uncovered the gendered nature of nations and nationality formations (Enloe, 2000; Mayer, 1999; Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989). The patriarchal bias in Indian nationality formation has also been discussed at great length (Chatterjee, 1989; Chaudhuri, 1999). Nowhere is the gendered nature of the Indian national identity more apparent than in the construction of the nation in the form of a woman: “During the struggle for independence and in the following years ... the nationalist movement mobilized around India as a symbol of the motherland” (Guichard, 2010, 139). Besides the professed aim of bringing the citizens emotionally closer to the national body, such a construction of the nation as mother – as “Mother India” or “Bharat Mata” – symbolizes the honor of a hegemonic masculinist collective. In the early years of independence, this mother image was reinforced by mainstream films like *Mother India* (Khan, 1957), which portrayed “the heroic and sacrificing Radha who struggles without giving up even when fate seems to be against her as she loses her cattle, her husband and two of her four sons” (Guichard, 2010, 142). The nation is, thus, posited with the traditional feminine traits of beauty, maternal love, gentleness, and self-sacrifice.

By extension, then, the ones entrusted with protecting this feminine imaginary – the “manly” men – need to be decisive, aggressive, battle-ready. Mainstream Bollywood films like *Roja* (Ratnam, 1992) and *Border* (J. P. Dutta, 1997) project this need for the men to “man up” and defend the honor of the nation, embodied sometimes as mother, sometimes as beloved, but always the woman. This masculinist enterprise of Indian nationalism can be traced at least as far back as the anti-colonial movement that aimed at the establishment of a modern sovereign nation, free from Western domination (Seth, 2013, 273). More recently, in the wake of “neoliberal globalization and the increasing dominance of right-wing, majoritarian Hindu chauvinism,” the “muscular nationalism ... through powerful male bodies” depicted in popular Bollywood films like *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (Mehta, 2005) has also become “a gendered signifier of India’s desire to be seen as a serious player on the global stage” (S. Banerjee, 2018, 50). Meanwhile, on the home front, “displays of ‘aggression’ for the ‘right cause,’” especially in mainstream media, “is not only tolerated but normalized” (NWMI, 2021). This aggression shows as toxic masculinity through “television channels, newspapers and social media outlets,” targeting marginalized groups like women and trans people (*ibid.*), as well as religious minorities like the Muslims.

While such aggressive machismo has become mainstream – and normalized – on the mainland in recent years, in the periphery, Assam and the rest of the

Northeast states have been at the receiving end of it throughout their post-independence association with the Indian nation. The most potent manifestation of this was through the deployment of armed forces in the region in response to the people's legitimate demands for self-determination. The presence of military and paramilitary forces "for the maintenance of 'peace and order' in the region" has been interpreted as the State adopting strategies applicable in International Relations, similar to an "interventionist policy" in an "alien space" (Oinam and Thangjam, 2006, 74). In sharp contrast to this is the State's reaction to armed insurrections outside of the periphery. The Naxalite-Maoist armed movement has been in force in various states of the mainland for decades now. Despite large-scale violence and a total breakdown of law and order, the government has steadfastly refused to deploy its military forces there, against its "own people" (Chowdhury, 2015). In contrast, the Indian State and its armed forces have persistently defended army operations against the Northeast rebels, raising questions about belongingness among the people here (Navlakha, 2012, 3). Thus:

The very idea of turning the Northeast into an "alien space" where martial laws like AFSPA operates suggests that people of the region is [sic.] closer to Hannah Arendt's "objective enemies" whose definition is created by virtue of their existence in a particular position at a historical moment in time, and that they do not fall within the self-definition of a state.

(Oinam and Thangjam, 2006, 54)

The AFSPA, or the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, is a legacy of colonial rule and it gives the armed forces of India license to operate with impunity. It grants "special powers" to the military and paramilitary forces deployed in places declared as "disturbed areas." These powers include the right to raid houses and destroy property that might be used by insurgents, "arrest without warrant" on "reasonable suspicion" a person who may have committed or is "about to commit a cognizable offence," and, of course, to shoot and kill (MHA, 1958).

The Indian forces, though, did not require the sanction of this law in 1966 to aerially bomb the people of the Mizo Hills (now Mizoram, but a part of Assam till 1971). This was in response to a revolt by a section of the Mizo people who were protesting administrative inaction during a deadly famine in the hills. The AFSPA only became operational in the Mizo Hills in 1967. When it did, several villages in the Mizo Hills were regrouped between 1967–1970 under the Defense of India Rules, 1962 (Nunthara, 1996, 251). The Protected and Progressive Villages (PPVs) formed by regrouping have been described as "nothing but concentration camps, minus gas chambers" (Barman, 2013). Similar regroupings were done by the British in 1958 to control Chinese squatters in Malaya and by the United States in 1962 in South Vietnam (Nunthara, 1996, 251). Regrouping destroyed the traditional social and cultural fabric of Mizo society.

Earlier, in the Naga Hills (also formerly a part of Assam) similar regroupings were undertaken in 1957 and 1964, but each time, the resistance of the Naga people had forced them to abandon their efforts (Nag, 2015, 68). The Nagas have, in fact, been the *bête noire* of the Indian State from the time it was being imagined into existence. A section of the Nagas resisted joining the Indian nation when the British withdrew and raised their own flag of independence on August 14, 1947, a day ahead of the Indian Union.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, a more amenable section of the Nagas was identified and drawn in, and the Naga Hills became a part of the Assam state of the Indian Union.

Naga political and armed groups have since continued to fight their battle against India, although several of them disintegrated and became factionalized along the way. The Indian State's early approach to their demand for self-determination was vocalized best by Morarji Desai, prime minister of India from 1977–1979, who vowed: “I will exterminate all the Naga rebels. There will be no mercy” (Steyn, 2002, 188). Epithets like “dog-eaters” and “naked Nagas” were also used (Kundra, 1996, 156) for the people whose political voices were violently suppressed using brutal measures and draconian laws like the AFSPA.

In the aftermath of the 1962 China-India war, though, the mainland faced the imperative of tempering its hostility with a concomitant effort to “nationalize” the Northeast, “to assert control over this frontier region and to make it a ‘normal’ part of India’s national space” (S. Baruah, 2003, 918). India’s defeat in the war exposed its vulnerabilities in a region that was surrounded by international neighbors: China, Burma/Myanmar, East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), and Bhutan. Over the next few decades, as these neighboring countries began to extend arms, training facilities, and refuge to the mushrooming Northeast Indian rebel groups, India developed its “Northeast policy”: “to extend the institutions of the state all the way into the international border zones, thus nationalizing this frontier space” (S. Baruah, 2003, 920). S. Baruah (2003) illustrates how introducing a new discourse on developmentalism in the region was one way of doing this.

Securitizing and militarizing the Northeast was the other, parallel path adopted in this nationalization process. Securitization, after all, is not always an end in itself. It is “a strategic (pragmatic) practice” that is ensconced “in the social context, a field of power struggles in which securitizing actors align on a security issue to swing the audience’s support toward a policy or course of action” (Balzacq, 2005, 172–173). While the recalcitrant elements and opposing ethnic groups were kept violently engaged by the security establishment, those sections of the rebellious communities that could be co-opted or controlled were being co-opted and controlled under this new Northeast policy approach.

Crystallizing the popular reductionist imagination and tendency to homogenize the region in policy, the North Eastern Council was constituted in 1971 as a statutory advisory body to discuss and make recommendations to the central government on subjects and projects of interest to two or

more states of the region (NEC, 2022). Subsequently, in 2001, the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDONER) was instituted “to accelerate the pace of socio-economic development of the Region so that it may enjoy growth parity with the rest of the country” (MDONER, 2021b). Unlike any other part of the country, the northeastern states are considered a separate category in central legislations. Budget allocations and transfer of resources are done under this distinctive head for all eight states lumped together (Ministry of Finance, 2021).

Assam and the other states of the Northeast were marked as “special category states” till India’s 14th Finance Commission recommended withdrawing this privilege (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2018). Until then, each special-category state received 90 percent of the funds from central government schemes as grant and 10 percent as loan (B. Singh, 2016). Meanwhile, hundreds of millions are also sanctioned in grants to the autonomous councils created or reorganized in response to the ethno-nationalist demands (MDONER, 2021a): there is, however, little or no stipulation on accountability regarding fund utilization. There is large-scale corruption among government officials, politicians, and bureaucrats as this public money is leaked into private coffers; the corrupt ethnic elite also enter into nexus with the insurgents who fill their coffers in turn. The result is not only the development of a parallel economy but also the growing influence of criminalized armed groups in the legitimate political process (Sahni and George, 2000). The ethnic elite remain “sufficiently” better off than “the majority, from whose ranks they are usually drawn to convince them that service to the elites and maintenance of the system is in their best interest” (Reardon, 1996, 11). In return, they help deflect the majority’s interest from the underlying causes of conflict. Additionally, they submerge the real conflicts between the center and the periphery’s peoples “in cultural norms, traditional myths, and political ideologies” (*ibid.*).

Under the two-pronged policy approach of continued securitization and increasing financial dependence, the Northeast has been turned into an infantile entity that is now entirely “nationalized” and under the control of the centralized State. This mainland mentality was best expressed by former parliamentarian Mamata Banerjee in the lower house of the Indian parliament: “We have to look after the NorthEast. They have got some insurgency problem and other problems also. So, the Government should treat the entire NorthEast as a child (*sic.*)” (Parliament of India, 1998).

This infantilization and simultaneous aggressive engagement parallels what I have elsewhere called India’s “Northeast Myth”: a stereotyped conception where categories like the exotic and the enigmatic on the one hand, and the fearsome and the loathsome on the other, take shape (U. Goswami, 2010). Thus, mainland media describes the region as an “obscure land (that) has myriad hidden treasures that only the natives and the hardy travelers who gathered courage to reconnoiter (*sic.*) its uncharted realms are aware of” (IndiaToday.in, 2015). This perception of the region has persisted for centuries.

The medieval Sakhis, or annals of the Sikh Gurus of India, mention Assam (or Kamrup as it was known to outsiders then) as a distant land, a land of black magic, where visitors from the mainland are turned into lambs by bewitching women (Dhillon, 1988, 78). It is a short leap from this enigmatic othering to painting the region as one of untamed head-hunting “tribals”<sup>33</sup> who are also cannibals (Raatan, 2003, 110). The person from the Northeast then alternates between the mainland’s imagination of them as the noble brute and the naked savage: “The exoticised, enigmatic noble savage can be tamed (read co-opted), but the naked brute understands only the language of violence” (U. Goswami, 2010). Militarization was a natural corollary of this myth that feeds into both the popular and policy approaches toward the region.

### **Masculinities in the Margins**

The hierarchical structures of patriarchy and militarized societies reflect one another. Militarized societies are characterized by “hyper-masculinized identity investments, arrogant ideological claims, and excessive – arguably depraved – military practices.” They construct or reproduce “feminized others who must be protected, controlled, detained, or eliminated by masculinized agents of ruling states” (Peterson, 2010, 28). The previous section substantiated how the Northeast periphery has been this “other” in the Indian popular and policy approaches in post-independence times. This section looks at the interactions between and within the patriarchies of the periphery as the mainland’s patriarchal structures consolidated themselves here. Structures of inequality existed in the ethnic mosaic of Assam even in pre-colonial and colonial times. How these inequalities inspired a conscious policy of ethnic fragmentation to generate conflicts in recent decades is of interest here. To this end, it focuses on the various hierarchies of postcolonial masculinity – “hegemonic, complicitous, marginalized, and subordinated” (Ouzgane and Coleman, 1998) – which informed the construction and reconstruction of ethno-nationalist identities in Assam.

During the anti-colonial movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the idea of a united India composed of thousands of diverse communities was being constructed when, “the universal of the nation (the anti-colonial nation) was being produced out of the negotiation of the singulars” (Samaddar, 2010, 82). As this ideology of Indian nationalism made inroads into the Northeast, the dominant Axamiyā-speaking community took on the mantle of the periphery’s patriarchs and led the region in joining the periphery to the mainland. Recollections of Indian National Congress (INC) leader Benudhar Sarma (1971) about the early days of the INC (the party at the helm of India’s anti-colonial movement) in Assam reveal that, till the early part of the twentieth century, the idea of Assam as a part of the Indian nation had only gained ground in urban centers among the educated middle class. Sarma (1971) reminisces how INC volunteers co-opted or converted people in the villages of Assam to the idea of Indian nationalism: they were resistant

to the idea of India. But just as the Chicken's Neck corridor kept the two landmasses connected geographically, the Axamiyā middle class of Assam took on the role of keeping the two landmasses connected politically and culturally. And just as the geographical link was tenuous and thin, the Axamiyā-speaking people's relation with the mainlanders was also ambiguous and wary.

Even as they joined the Indian State, the fathers of the Axamiyā nation had reservations against Assam's wholesale assimilation into the Indian nation: stalwarts like Lakhminath Bezbarua, among others, maintained their image of an Axom Dex (Assam Country) that was, "till recently ... an independent country, independent of any Indian ruler" (U. Misra, 2000, 81). The Axamiyā press in the heyday of Indian nationality formation in Assam was divided into two categories: one that "tilted more towards Indian nationalism" and the other, "leaning more towards the cause of Assam and the Assamese than Indian nationalism" (N. G. Mahanta, 2013, 8). Public opinion voiced through the newspapers of the Brahmaputra Valley betrayed "some sort of uneasiness and apprehension of economic and cultural domination by the outsiders." This was "the tone of the Assamese press in the pre-Independence period and even after Independence, this attitude prevailed" (S. P. Baruah, 2000, 330–331 cited in Mahanta, 2013, 8–9).

Overwhelmingly, the fear of being included in Pakistan under the "Grouping Scheme" proposed by the British and subsequently becoming Islamized – or marginalized in an Islamic State – led the dominant Axamiyā-Hindu leadership to join the Indian Union (Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2002, 7–8). But in a bid to retain their distinctiveness within the Indian nation, they projected the marriage of the twin threads of "Aryan" and "non-Aryan" cultures in Assam as their unique contribution, "an energising factor in India's civilization" (Bhuyan, 1960, 173). The "non-Aryan" "primitive tribes" were at their "eternal command" (Bhuyan, 1960, 56); the "elemental energy" of these "unsophisticated people of Assam" was to act as a foil to the "dwindling virility" of the "intellectual Aryans" (Bhuyan, 1960, 56–67).

This ethnic hierarchy – a chain of subjugation and marginalization – had been solidified toward the end of the colonial rule when Indians acquired a semblance of political self-governance. As the race for power under the changing regime intensified, the indigenous communities were already "othered" and alienated by being pronounced to be "backward." Thus, the Government of India Act 1935 made provisions for segregated electorates and allotted four seats from the "Backward Plains Tribal" special constituencies of Assam (Guha, 1977, 218–220): the Bodos were designated a "plains" tribe, as opposed to the Karbis and Dimasas, which were "hill" tribes. Following the first elections to the Assam Legislative Assembly under the 1935 Act held in 1937, successive governments led by the Indian National Congress (INC) and the All-India Muslim League failed to hold fort for too long. Then, INC leader Gopinath Bardoloi, in an effort to topple the Muslim League government in power and gain the allegiance of the tribal leaders, "raised the bogey of tribal people in plains losing their lands to immigrants." His

demands for a protective system of tribal belts and better education for the tribal populations helped him in forming a coalition government with the Tribal League in September 1938 (Guha, 1977, 229).

A decade thereafter, though, in November 1948, he managed to alienate the same plains tribal population. In the Constituent Assembly debates that year, he argued against providing any special protection for the plains tribes, such as the Sixth Schedule<sup>4</sup> of the Indian Constitution: the Schedule was devised in the Constituent Assembly to provide autonomy to the hill peoples only. In the Joint Report of the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas (other than Assam) Sub-Committee and the North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee, it was reasoned that such provisions were not needed for the plains tribals since they were “of course a population which has assimilated in high degree the life of the plains” (G. N. Bardoloi, 1947). This process of alienation gained momentum in the post-independence period till it reached a breaking point in 1987 and the Bodo Movement was launched.

The Bodo Movement was one of the first in a succession of unarmed social movements and armed insurrections set in motion by the Assam Andolan. Through these movements, the indigenous communities of Assam expressed their discontent against their relative deprivation in post-independence Assam. Studying the genesis and development of the Bodo Movement – as well as the enduring nature of the cycle of violence and conflicts it set in motion – illustrates what happens when different masculinist structures with varying levels of patriarchal control collide. Assam’s experience shows that disparate societies engage with and negotiate their positions of relational power by either coming in conflict with or coopting each other to regenerate and replicate hegemonic masculinities in the course of sustained political conflicts. The role of the Indian State inciting and/or exacerbating conflicts between the marginalized constituents of the periphery – as well as the way in which the Axamiyā-speaking community addressed these conflicts – are especially indicative of how centers and peripheries of power all become enmeshed in this process.

The Bodo Movement voiced the community’s socio-cultural and political grievances against the dominant Axamiyā and demanded a separate state for the Bodos within the Indian Union. Like the Assam Movement before it, it began as a non-violent social movement. In dealing with it, the Axamiyā-Hindu ruling elite revealed a disdain and arrogance that widened the gap with the Bodo community. The leader of the Assam Andolan, Prafulla Mahanta, became the chief minister of Assam after the Assam Accord was signed in 1985, and a new government comprising of the Andolan leadership was formed. The Bodo Movement was started by leaders of the community who had fought alongside Mahanta in the Andolan but were sidelined in the new government. In 1989, when the Movement had gained momentum, Mahanta invited a section of the Bodo leadership to his office for discussions. However, he did not meet with the leaders when they arrived, nor did he assign any of his

ministers to conduct the meeting on his behalf. Instead, three minor members of the legislative assembly were sent to represent the Assam Government in this meeting where the Bodo representatives were treated with disrespect (Borgohain, 2001, 130).

Meanwhile, to manage the Movement on the ground, the state government replicated the center's muscular machismo and used the same tactics of suppression that the Indian State had used against them during the Assam Andolan. "Excessive police atrocities, indiscriminate mass arrest, heavy torture" upon peaceful political protesters were reported during the movement (N. Hazarika, 1998, 103). The response was armed insurrection among the Bodos. The patriarchs on the mainland helped prop it up, providing strategy and training: the government of Assam alleged that the Indian intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), was behind the provision of arms and combat training to Bodo activists (S. Hazarika, 1995, 156; Hindu, 1989). This ensured that a section of the Bodo community remained indebted to the mainland.

Meanwhile, another section among them had previously organized in 1986 to form the armed National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) aimed at creating a sovereign country for the Bodos, independent of India. The NDFB maintained close ties with the United Liberation Front of Assom (ULFA), which in 1979 grew out of the same grievances that informed the Assam Andolan and professed to fight for all Asombasi (inhabitants of Assam) (U. Misra, 2009, 16). Its approach to the ethno-nationalist aspirations of the smaller indigenous groups of Assam, however, is problematic: it is opposed to "further breakup of Assam" and, consequently, to the statehood demands of these groups (U. Misra, 2009, 15).

When the Bodo Accord of 2003 was signed, the NDFB was left out of the agreement. As a result, violent internecine wars broke out in Bodoland within the community. Additionally, because the creation of Bodoland marginalized the migrant and indigenous communities – like the Koch Rajbongshi, East Bengali Muslims, and Adivasis – who lived in the Bodoland Autonomous Territorial Districts (BTAD), they came into violent confrontation with the majority Bodos (Konwar and Tripathy, 2018). Meanwhile, outside Bodoland, inspired by the (relative) success of the Bodo Movement (and the creation of Mizoram as a separate state in 1987) other ethnic and indigenous groups also started demanding autonomy and statehood within India. The creation of Bodoland, thus, formed many margins within the margin. A little help from the center of power on the mainland brought the warring patriarchies of these marginalized constituencies into violent confrontation with each other.

## **When Patriarchies Collide**

The core-periphery conflictual relationship reproduced the mainland's structures and cultures of violence in the periphery. At the same time, it also strengthened and solidified the periphery's pre-existing structures of inequality.

The mainland's machismo found reflection in a conscious policy of militarizing the periphery; this, in turn, led to the proliferation of hypermasculinized identities that informed ethnic relations within the periphery. This section explores the consequences of these multiple patriarchies coming together in conflictual relationships: it reveals that when patriarchies collide in power struggles in multi-ethnic contexts, the shifting ethno-nationalist dynamics inform political conflicts while concurrently leading to a mutation of gender-based relations in society.

In Assam, not only did ethnic conflicts become endemic to the periphery, but women's position in society also underwent a change for the worse. This section ties together ethnic fragmentation, the strengthening of hypermasculinist identities, and the changing faces of sexism in Assam to argue that they are interconnected. To that end, it begins by highlighting the insidious ways in which patriarchy functions here to uphold an illusion of women's empowerment while limiting them in many ways. It then goes on to examine the two-pronged purpose this illusion serves: to resist the mainland's machismo on the one hand, and on the other, to reinforce patriarchal control within the periphery.

In Assam and the Northeast as a whole, the gender dichotomy has historically had its nuances. Within the patriarchal system, approaches and attitudes towards the ideals of masculinity and femininity were not as rigid as on the mainland. For instance, the dominant Axamiyā-Hindu community is a caste-based, patriarchal, and hierarchical society, as is much of the mainland. However, comparative studies of village life have shown that unlike the women on the mainland, among the Axamiyā-Hindu women,

confinement within the house or limited mobility is not maintained strictly, nor has it been so traditionally. Flexibility of caste interaction, tribal and ethnic influence and women's involvement in agricultural work in this rice belt area are the primary points for this greater mobility.

(Behal, 1984, 1775)

Often, the women are seen working harder than the men, even in the paddy fields (Saikiani 1930, 751; field observations). Besides, the women of Assam are also involved in commercial activities and financial transactions. The handloom, especially, is of immense importance. The Ahom kings who ruled over Assam for 600 years before the British colonized the region, patronized weaving, which became a common practice among the people across class and caste differences (S. N. Sharma, 1989, 252). During the time of the year when agricultural activities remained suspended, weaving took its place as primary occupation. The loom has had a direct connection to gender correlations in Assam society:

Because of the loom, women's mobility automatically unwinds. The knowledge of handling money comes because they sell their products and

also buy raw material. The knowledge of communication and locations and their interaction with people outside the village brings in a broader outlook and understanding of their society and themselves.

(Behal, 1984, 1775)

Proximity to indigenous communities like the Bodo, or the Dimasa and the Karbi, and perceptions about gender norms in these societies undoubtedly informed such agency among the women of the dominant community. The indigenous communities had traditions that were community-based and accorded “a relatively high status to women without considering them equal to men” (Fernandes et al., 2008, 2). Chandraprabha Saikiani, pioneer of women’s rights in Assam, betrayed both a sense of difference and a need for emulation during her speech as president of the first convention of the Assam Kachari Women’s Association (The Bodo and the Dimasa communities of Assam were known as Kacharis before they shed the appellation because of the derogatory connotation it carried):

There is no stigma of untouchability among the Kacharis, no rigidity in social and religious laws, healthy strong and hardworking mother and child can be found only among the Kachari community. Evils like the purdah system and child marriage have not been able to enervate this community. ... The men and women of this community have equal rights, both are equally hardworking in the struggle of life. Unlike other women, the Kachari woman is not dependent on the man for food and clothing. This is a matter of pride for the Kachari woman.

(Saikiani, 1930, 747; *my translation*)

With new structures and systems of governance coming into place in post-independence times, however, changes in the gender hierarchy became inevitable. For example, in studying the interface between customary laws and the formal laws in post-independence India, Fernandes and Pereira (2005, 27–29) find that “most modern land laws ... are individual-based and ownership is by and large with men.” This inspires “many tribes that consider their customary law intrinsic to their identity” to invest their customary laws, too, “with a fundamentalist interpretation, especially on the gender issue.” The patriarchs of the communities now re-interpret their customary land laws to assume individual ownership while restricting women’s access and claims.

Gender relations within indigenous communities, thus, have changed for the worse, and women’s access to economic activities and financial independence is also limited in many ways. Introduction of settled cultivation and commercial crops among indigenous populations traditionally involved in swidden or *jhum* cultivation have also led to fewer women identifying themselves as gainfully employed: they are made to feel more like unproductive “housewives” under the changed economy. Women felt an integral part of the *jhum* cultivation, the produce from which sustained the family throughout the

year. However, with commercial crops being sold at the market by men who bring home produce procured in the markets outside the homes, women have been marginalized in the agricultural economy. And this despite the fact that they continue to toil in the fields alongside their husbands (Fernandes et al., 2008, 9).

Meanwhile, decades of violent conflict and increasing militarization have also strengthened patriarchal structures. Resistance to ethnic discrimination and assertion of political demands led to crystalizing masculine forms of ethno-nationalist imaginations and aspirations. After all, like all forms of nationalism, ethno-nationalism, too, springs “from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (Enloe, 2014, 93). Women’s issues are non-issues. And as in the economic sphere, in politics as well, women play pivotal roles in both the civil and armed movements for ethno-nationalist assertion, but they are not made to feel an integral part of the process. Public politics, like everywhere else, is “men’s politics” (Connell, 2005, 204): it is the men who take up arms against the various hierarchies of masculinity above them; it is they who decide the course of the ethno-nationalist struggles; and it is they who negotiate peace when negotiations are offered.

This was the case with the Bodo Movement, where the women were encouraged to participate and play crucial roles like caregivers, informers, and couriers. Military excesses and sexual assault against them were decried as assaults against the community itself. But when the three Bodo Accords were signed in 1993, 2003, and 2020, and power-sharing arrangements were made, the women suddenly became invisible and marginalized on the post-insurgency ethno-nationalist political stage. Typically then, as the men get co-opted by the patriarchal structures above them, the women are divested of real power; they are increasingly invested with a symbolic value: they become symbols of the community’s culture. So, in order to assert the community’s restored sense of identity and pride, Bodo women and girls are forced to wear the traditional dress, *dokhona* (K. Kalita, 2017). Since the Bodo Movement, women’s attire has been policed; women who resisted wearing traditional dresses were publicly shamed and, sometimes, physically assaulted (field interviews; Devi, 2016, 131).

The symbolic value attached to women, however, ends there: as keepers of the community’s culture. Most nationalist movements invest the nation with the identity of a woman but the woman herself is, in turn, degraded in many ways. The indigenous communities of Assam, though, have never imagined a “motherland” or a “fatherland.” Land, for them, is not an abstract concept; it is tied to their everyday lives and existences in very palpable ways. Land alienation, indeed, is one of the greatest motivating factors of the ethno-nationalist movements. Their imagined homelands, therefore, relate to their ethnic identities and are named as such: Bodoland, Dima Hasao (Dimasa Hills), Karbi Anglong (Karbi Hills), Misingland, and so on. For the non-indigenous Axamiyā-speaking Hindu, however, symbolic representations are important. Thus, the rallying cry of the Assam Movement was “Joi Ai Axom” or “Hail

Mother Assam.” The movement was inspired by what was perceived as the “betrayal” by Mother India: her “step-motherly” treatment of Assam. After all, Assam in their imagination was the *numoliya ji*, or youngest daughter, of Mother India, late entrant as she was into the Indian national fold.

That a patriarchal society could don a feminized and feminizing identity of the youngest daughter definitely signals a departure from a rigidly dichotomous worldview. Seven Sisters, the self-bestowed epithet, too, is indicative of this. The influence of the indigenous traditions has already been discussed. The practical functioning of the long-ruling Ahom monarchy also contributed to tempering patriarchal presumptions in Assam. An invading force that entered Assam from Southeast Asia in the thirteenth century, the Ahoms established their kingdom here by intermingling with the local indigenous populations and synthesizing synergistic, non-dualistic identities (like that of the Ahom-Chutiya). The interethnic Axamiyā identity is the end product of this process of synergy between diverse indigenous and autochthonous communities living in the state; no one community can claim sole ownership of the label (U. Goswami, 2014). Since the coming of the colonial rulers, however, the dominant Axamiyā-Hindu community monopolized the identity label. Policies of the postcolonial Indian State encouraged this. As a result, the constituent communities regressed toward reidentifying with their original ethnic identities, and ethno-nationalist conflicts broke out.

The Ahoms also adopted similar non-dualistic approaches in matters of policy and military preparedness. The *paik* system, for instance, was one which obfuscated the distinction between war and peace, soldier and subject. The *paik* was a farmer or skilled worker who provided non-military public service to the state in peacetime and served as a soldier during war (Guha, 1991, 86). Wars were not always inevitable, and the Ahom rulers devised solutions to share power rather than be perpetually at war. Thus, the foothills of Bhutan, which now comprise most of the BTAD, were a shared frontier between the Ahom and the Bhutanese kings: each collected revenue here by rotation and neither king had absolute control over its administration. There was no centralized administration in this region that was traditionally controlled by local rulers known as *raikats/zamindars* (landlords) and *rajas* (kings) who held hereditary rights over the territory and paid taxes or tribute to the surrounding powerful regimes, while maintaining some amount of autonomy over the administration of their territories (Bhuyan, 1974; Hamilton, 1987). The British began emphasizing settled frontiers and enumerating and classifying subjects, congealing cartographic borders and boundaries between communities (U. Goswami, 2014, 71).

Subsequently, as ideas of Indian nationalism made inroads into the periphery, the Axamiyā middle class came increasingly in contact with the mainland’s Hindu societies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In imitation, their adherence to caste distinctions became stricter. Hitherto unknown ostentations entered Axamiyā-Hindu rituals, and social evils like opposition to widow remarriage became pronounced (Guha, 1977, 68–69).

At the same time, the denigration of “non-Aryan” indigenous practices also heightened: indigenous beliefs and practices were seen as regressive, and food habits especially were considered unclean in the Hindu universe (U. Goswami, 2014, 56). The indigenous communities were labeled “backward.” This served the purpose of legitimizing the subjugation of the ethnic others by the leaders of the dominant community who assumed the role of the benign patriarchs shouldering the burden of modernizing them.

These benign patriarchs could not conceive of themselves as oppressors of the marginalized, whether it was the indigenous communities or the women. In 1954, Member of the Legislative Assembly, Mahendra Mohan Choudhury (later Assam chief minister, 1970–1972), denied women were oppressed and “hence no separate scheme for the upliftment of women in rural areas is considered necessary.” The rural development department, he maintained, would work to uplift “all the people in the rural areas irrespective of their sex” (Assam Legislative Assembly, 1954). In the decades thereafter, this policy approach, of course, changed. New policies of “women empowerment” were introduced by successive governments. Schemes like Mamata (mother’s love), Mamoni (mother dear), and Majoni (little mother, a way of addressing little girls) under the Assam Bikash Yojana (Assam Development Scheme) provide financial and health services to pregnant women and girl children (Centre for Health Informatics, 2016); the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) established community play centers and provided employment to local women (Social Welfare, Government of Assam, 2021); and female community health activists are trained under the National Rural Health Mission (National Health Mission, 2022). What has not changed, though, is the failure to perceive of women as individuals with independent agency: most of these schemes are aimed at them as mothers, daughters, and members of the community at large.

Addressing the “women-and-children” category of victimhood in public policies is, of course, not unique to Assam, nor is it confined to State policy-making. It is informed by a large body of literature, especially in the social and political sciences, that continues to attach women’s identities to that of the children, “as if they could not play an accepted and recognized role in society when they are not associated with children” (Puechguirbal, 2004, 5). Public conversations and popular rhetoric also draw on this association to circumscribe women to the symbolic role of carrying the burden of and perpetuating (in their person and inside their wombs) their community’s ethnic identities. Marginalized at home and in public platforms, they remain a “mute but necessary allegorical ground for the transactions of nationalist history” (Radhakrishnan, 1992, 84). The men, on the other hand, are out there, fighting “against the enemy from the outside” (*ibid.*). In this fight, as in most projects of anti-colonial nationality formation, the ethno-nation becomes the woman at times, but the woman herself is reduced to only a symbol or icon of nationhood and has no intrinsic value. The periphery’s patriarchy then uses her to consolidate its position at home and in relation to the mainland.

When the occasion calls for it, the patriarchs use her to counter the hegemony of the mainland. For instance, at the height of insurgent conflict, when the Indian Security Forces were using rape as a weapon of war against the peripheral populations, protests were heard from all sections of society. During the 1990s, rape victims like Bhanimai Dutta and Raju Baruah were hailed as “martyrs.” In post-insurgency Assam, as former male insurgents enter mainstream politics, these martyrs are forgotten. These women are treated by the Indian Armed Forces as mere bodies representing the physical markers of community honor, and consequently used to punish, intimidate, coerce, humiliate or degrade the entire community (Kumar, 2002, 129; Kirk, 1992, 55).

The periphery’s patriarchy also borrows from and subscribes to such sexism and misogyny. But it disguises its misogyny by referencing the now-forgotten, but historically (and relatively) elevated position of the women of the periphery. Violence and sexual abuse are regularly reported in the media, holding women responsible for the crimes committed against them: many of these media houses are owned or controlled by political leaders and legislators. In July 2015, a male journalist compared women wearing short skirts to monkeys: he never tendered an unqualified apology and was not called upon to do so (India Today Web Desk, 2015). Not long after, the then chief minister proclaimed on International Women’s Day: “I can say it proudly that the condition of women in Assam is far better than states like Gujarat, Bihar, Haryana” (The Northeast Today, 2016); Gujarat, Bihar, and Haryana are states on the Indian mainland.

By obfuscating the reality, and reinforcing its otherness in relation to the mainland, the periphery’s patriarchy manages to consolidate its position at home: its masculine agency is responsible for policing and protecting the women and their bodies – which is also the national body – and in doing so, the patriarchs “allow” them more freedom. Meanwhile quotidian violence keeps these women quiescent amidst an atmosphere of fear and insecurity: the perception of danger encourages them “to adhere to gendered social norms for behavior that restrict their independence in public space” (Day, 2001, 109).

Similarly, in conflict-habituated societies like Assam’s, endemic violence also serves a dual purpose for the “two sets of belligerent institutionalised power” (P. Banerjee, 2001, 132): the State’s agents and the insurgents. For one, such violence gives the insurgent groups the narrative backdrop required to prop up their rhetoric of protectionism that ensures a civilian support structure without which they cannot fight the powerful State machinery. Meanwhile, these everyday terrors legitimize the claim staked by the political leadership to vocalize on behalf of the community while the people of the community are held down by fear. Visiting isolated villages on the Indo-Bhutan border between 2012 and 2014, in Barpeta and Chirang districts of Assam, I spoke to women who revealed how armed men visited their villages at night, demanding to be fed and sheltered. The women have to comply for fear of their lives and the well-being of their families. They, thus, become

unwilling and unwitting actors in political conflicts that shake up power structures in distant centers while they are left to deal with the immediate terrors.

Fear is a gendered construct, not merely because it constructs women as being more susceptible to it than are men, but it is also the basis of building a masculine gender identity through negotiation and polarization with the feminine (Day, 2001, 110). Masculinity, specifically aggressive masculinity, is at the heart of the notions of defense and security upheld by patriarchal States. Masculine agency is required as much to protect the women themselves as the nation/ethno-nation they symbolize; within the community, this masculine agency may assume a machismo that not only silences women but also degrades them. But when it comes to national state security thinking, it surfaces as concerns over “the dangers for women in front-line positions” and “foreign penetration of the motherland” (Sharp, 1996, 100). This fragile masculinity especially manifests within the home front when facing off with a stronger hegemonic masculinist force from without. To reclaim its position of centrality in the periphery, “competing forms of aggressive masculinity embodied in law enforcement and military training are offered as solutions” (Stabile and Rentschler, 2005, xiii). The cycle of violence thus continues with each marginalized entity and each new constituency of power that is created. The same model of brutality and aggressive machismo is replicated at different levels.

### **Fear, Conflict, Violence**

It is in the nature of inherently patriarchal systems to imitate or mutate, annihilate or incorporate, as it sees fit, all to the end of achieving power. A “genderized system” is thus valorized where “power requires a winner and a protector” (Woehrle, 2015, 129). Usually, that protector status is invested with “a hypermasculinized identity” and “to fail to protect is labelled femininity” (*ibid.*). Thus, the fear of emasculation drives men as much as masculinized nations and ethno-nations. For example, feminist peace research has identified that “the major obstacle to disarmament is not political but psychosocial; it is fear – the fear of being defenceless in the face of an attacker or an antagonist – that is almost universally manifest in both individuals and in societies” (Reardon, 1996, 6). The fear of the other as aggressor has been ingrained into the body politic as well as in the ethno-nationalist agenda through historical processes.

In the transnational region where the Northeast is located, India is locked in a contest of influence and control with the neighboring countries, especially China. This “Great Game East” played out “at the crossroads of the Indian Subcontinent, China, and Southeast Asia” involves, foremost, the Sino-Indian rivalry since the 1950s (Lintner, 2015, 1). The frequent standoffs between the Chinese and Indian armed forces on the international border have been attributed to “the fear that their foreign policies are targeted against

the other" (Gokhale, 2021). The two countries are also in constant competition for access to and control of the resources of the smaller neighbors, like Burma. Western countries, led by the United States, are also players in this game (Lintner, 2015, 4). Not only is the United States actively involved in the internal politics of Burma, it is also supportive of India in its bid "to counter China's growing influence in the region – and beyond" (Lintner, 2015, 11). Additionally, "intelligence operatives from various other countries have also wanted to keep an eye on the local insurgencies inside the 'forbidden' tribal areas in India's northeast, long out of bounds for foreigners and hotbeds of intrigue and meddling by China, Pakistan, and Bangladesh" (Lintner, 2015, 1–2).

In this "intriguing, dramatic, and unpredictable" geopolitical context, India is obsessed with state security in the Northeast. In recent years, despite India's claims that armed conflict has ended in the region, its army and "other centrally controlled security forces" continue to consolidate their presence here: "This is partly because their deployment in Northeast India serves both internal and external security ends, and, increasingly, the two have become indistinguishable" (S. Baruah, 2020a, 7). In the interest of national security, the State often targets its own citizens in the periphery "because their country of origin happened to be the enemy in an armed conflict." During the 1962 Indo-China war, India interned the people of Chinese descent in Assam, whose ancestors came as indentured laborers of European tea planters in the nineteenth century (Lintner, 2015, 15). A similar distrust of the transborder peoples of the periphery has also limited India's exploration of the immense potential for paradiplomacy<sup>5</sup> in the Northeast: the fear of China "emerging as the single or most important player in the paradiplomacy outreach of the geopolitically sensitive Northeast" has inhibited existing provisions for "autonomy to the states of the Northeast for pursuing economic, cultural, educational, and other outreach with the border nations" (Nayar, 2021).

Such mistrust of the "other" is mirrored by the people of the periphery; in their turn, they target migrant populations fearing demographic swamping, competition over resources and livelihood, and religious and linguistic minoritization. They also fear that their identities and rights will be overwhelmed by larger/more powerful ethnic groups. These "collective fears of the future" cause intense conflicts (Lake and Rothchild, 1996, 41). The violence and terror instilled in communities and individuals as a consequence of securitization and militarization have been discussed at length in this chapter. This overall climate of fear keeps the cycle of violence going. Meanwhile, "ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs, operating within groups, build upon these fears of insecurity and polarize society" (*ibid.*).

Such polarization manifests itself in deeper ethnic fragmentation as well as in a regression of gender-based relations. As feminists have pointed out, the oppression of women by men is the "most fundamental form of structural oppression" (Reardon, 1996, 7). Hierarchical relations informed by hypermasculinist violence, therefore, impact social/ethnic relations as much

as the relationship between sexes. Especially in a war-torn, conflict-habituated society where military and militant violence instill hyperaggressive masculinity aimed at “the making of violent men,” these men “do violence” both on the home front and at the war front (Maringira, 2021, 103–105). Women become victims of “the physical and psychological violence of dislocation, fragmentation of families, loss of children and men, and the predatory masculinity and misogyny of war, rape, and murder” (Manchanda, 2001, 18). Fear for personal safety limits their mobility; they are excluded from political processes and public spaces, leaving the spoils of war for the men.

Fear, thus, is both a driving force of control and a tool used for subjugation. The discussion in this chapter illustrates why it needs to be understood as a gendered construct. This construct feeds into structures and cultures of inequality that keep conflicts alive in a never-ending cycle of violence. This cycle is powered by the intricate connections between hyper-masculine identities, ethnic conflicts, and sexism in society. To break this cycle, to transcend conflicts, and to create a new reality (Galtung, 2004), it is imperative to trace the gendered history of this violence. And because gender is “a product of history, and also a *producer* of history” (Connell, 2005, 81), both epistemology and politics must come together:

Only by the application of a theory of reciprocal causation giving equal consideration to both the psychological and the structural causes of sexism and the war system can we gain a sufficient understanding of the problems and their interrelationships to enable us to transcend them.

(Reardon, 1996, 1)

The following chapter will delve into the psychology of fear and the processes by which it is constructed as an essential tool of power and control over the subject and the subjugated in multi-ethnic and conflict-habituated societies like Assam. The “learned behaviors … resulting from an interplay between psychological and structural factors” (Reardon, 1996, 1) will be analyzed closely. The subsequent chapters will then explore how these behaviors can be changed so transformation can happen.

## Notes

- 1 The epithet was coined by journalist and bureaucrat, J. P. Saikia, in his book *The Land of Seven Sisters* (J. P. Saikia, 1976).
- 2 Mahatma Gandhi, the ‘father’ of the nascent Indian nation, extended his support to their cause (Biswas and Suklabaidya, 2008, 189). But, then, Gandhi “represented himself as ‘female’, performing ‘feminine’ roles like spinning” (Katrak, 1992, 397).
- 3 Since the sixteenth century, the term tribe has referred to groups/communities which lived in primitive and barbarous conditions (Xaxa, 2005). It is viewed with suspicion as a colonial construct and has thus come under much attack (Beteille, 1995). Wherever not qualified with quotes, this study will stick to the definition of a tribe as an “administrative and political concept in India”. This definition has

been endorsed by the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) in its report, 'The Scheduled Tribes' (K. S. Singh, 1998).

4 Articles 244 (2) and 275 (1) of the Indian Constitution provide for the Sixth Schedule to apply to the administration of the tribal areas in the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. The provisions of the schedule include the creation of autonomous districts and autonomous regions, where the elected district and regional councils have powers to legislate on matters relating to land allotment and use, cultivation, appointment of chiefs, inheritance of property, and marriage and social customs, among other subjects. Full text available at: [www.mea.gov.in/Images/pdf1/S6.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Images/pdf1/S6.pdf).

5 "Para-diplomacy, as contrasted with formal diplomacy, means a process which enables the constituent units of a sovereign state, to conduct their own diplomatic engagement with another state or its constituent units for the pursuit of their own interests" (R. Chatterji and Saha, S, 2017, 375).

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### 3 Many Violences

## Conflict as Habit

#### Introduction

In September 2021, at Dholpur in Assam's Sipajhar district, the Government of Assam undertook to remove “illegal encroachers” – primarily Muslims of East Bengali origin – from roughly four thousand acres of government land so that landless indigenous communities could benefit from a proposed agricultural project to be set up there (Agarwala, 2021). Removal proceedings were undertaken before the High Court could arbitrate on a petition filed by the villagers (termed encroachers) against the proposed eviction; and the proceedings were conducted without a prior rehabilitation plan (*ibid.*). With the presence of armed police, and amidst protests by the local community and civil society organizations, the exercise turned violent. Officially, three people, including a 12-year-old boy, were killed in the eviction drive; the actual count of the dead and missing may be higher. Among the injured were 11 policemen (Syeda, 2021).

The brutalization of the State's armed forces and the making of the military man conditioned to “do violence” has been discussed in the previous chapters. These chapters discussed how “military masculinity” (Maringira, 2021) is created and thrives in societies characterized by hierarchical power relationships. They also outlined how such masculinity informs the violent actions not just of soldiers but of citizens as well. Such legitimization of hypermasculinist violence among civilians was evident in an incident during the eviction that went on to attract international attention, eliciting strong reactions in both social and traditional media: an official photographer documenting the drive stomped on a man who lay dying after being shot at by the police. The act was caught on camera and the video went viral on social media (Syeda, 2021).

The responses to the incident divided Axamiyā society along two lines. Those who supported the eviction drive subscribed to a longstanding conviction that all members of the affected community were “illegal” immigrants appropriating the resources and livelihoods of the autochthonous and indigenous peoples. This view persists despite the government's subsequent admission that “as per reports received by the deputy commissioners, illegal foreigners have not occupied any government land” (Staff Reporter, 2021).

Prior to the February 1979 elections in Assam, India's chief election commissioner referred to the inclusion of a large number of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls (Murty, 1983, 4). Incited by the comment, "the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), declared they would boycott the elections since the electoral lists contained the names of large numbers of people who had entered the country illegally" (Weiner, 1983, 280). The Assam Andolan began immediately after. The Assam Accord that ended the Andolan in 1985 stipulated that "foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and upto 24th March, 1971 shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order 1964" (Government of Assam, 2021). Thirty-six years later, people from this community are still "illegal" in the popular perception. Habitually, they "are accused of not only occupying land belonging to the native population but also diluting and debasing the traditional Assamese Hindu culture through the instrument of a foreign language (Bengali) and an alien religion (Islam)" (Borooh, 2013, 44). Incidentally, Sipajhar is in Darrang district, which was also the epicenter of the Assam Andolan.

Those who were horrified by the incident, meanwhile, were united in opposing the "othering" and persecution of the migrant community. They counter the popular perception of the Muslim community as recent, land-grabbing, "illegal" immigrants, knowing that in recent decades, "Bangladesh's growing prosperity relative to Assam" has, to a great extent, dulled Assam's "attraction as a migratory destination" (Borooh, 2013, 51). Besides, the migrants have accepted Axamiyā as their mother tongue, identifying themselves as Axamiyā in consecutive census operations. They are keen to assimilate into the "mainstream" and, most importantly, they constitute the backbone of Assam's agricultural economy today. Hardworking, enterprising, and innovative, they have turned uncultivable riverine land productive, introduced new methods of cultivation and new crops, and contribute to the bulk of the agricultural production in Assam (Borooh, 2013).

Within these critically thinking Axamiyā people, some felt that the photographer's action was emblematic of the utter barbarism of Axamiyā society and a death of compassion among a people that have been growing progressively xenophobic (P. Baruah, 2021). Another section of the population shifted the blame entirely on the current right-wing government and the polarization that its anti-Muslim rhetoric has been inciting in Assam (A. Saikia, 2021). Both these responses, however, need to be considered in tandem and connected back to the historical entrenchment of hypermasculinist violence in Assam since its post-independence association with the Indian mainland.

Previous chapters discussed the interconnections between militarization, hypermasculinization, and gendered violence in the context of protracted ethno-nationalist conflicts in Assam. To contextualize the hatred that drives a human being to stomp on another dying human, this chapter will examine

how these interconnections inform the many different kinds of violence prevalent in Axamiyā society: sexual and political, intimate and public. These violences that characterize post-insurgency Assam are typical of conflict-habituated societies where there is neither negative peace – that is, peace characterized by a negation of violence through conflict transformation (Galtung and Fischer, 2013, 139) – nor positive peace or “peace-building by cooperation and harmony” (*ibid.*). Instead, the signing of peace treaties and ceasefire agreements de-escalate violence and lead to disengagement (ostensibly) but cultures of violence remain deeply entrenched. Subsequently, this entrenched violence mutates; its manifestation takes on different forms. The Sipajhar incident needs to be viewed against this long history of violence in Assam.

Such incidents of violence also reveal how the proclamations of peace made by the Indian State in post-insurgency Assam are untenable (Agarwala, 2022): although the armed insurgencies and independentist movements are in abeyance or demobilized, violence has taken root in society in many forms. While State- and government-sponsored violence continues to manifest in multiple ways, civilians have also appropriated violent responses as legitimate. In July 2021, the Press Trust of India reported on a surge in police encounters where “more than a dozen suspected militants and criminals have been shot dead in the state since May as they reportedly tried to escape from custody” (Press Trust of India, 2021a). It was alleged that these killings were “a ploy to ‘silence’ lower-rung criminals to protect their bosses running illegal syndicates, including politicians and top police officers” (*ibid.*). Such allegations cannot be dismissed outright in a state where the police and law-enforcement agencies have a track record of committing extra-judicial violence: for example, the “secret killings” of Assam between 1996 and 2001, where armed masked men entered people’s homes and killed family members of insurgents as a way to coerce them to surrender. Nobody was prosecuted for the crimes, and most accounts and documentations of the killings remain anecdotal, not official (M. Talukdar et al., 2008). The culture of impunity thus perpetuated allows police personnel to fire on 12-year-old children, on the one hand, and, on the other, propels a civilian to stomp on a dying human.

Without escalating or exacerbating, violence continues to mutate and take on different forms and identify vulnerable targets. Parties in conflict internalize “conflict-habituated patterns of behavior and attitude” (Diamond, 1997, 354). These patterns, or “the way things are,” become the habitual ways of operating. They are entrenched, invisible, and “in the fabric of everyday life as well as in the political arena, they act as powerful default settings” (Diamond, 1997, 353–354). Consequently, people become unable to explore new behaviors and attitudes that alone can change the basic structure of conflict and break the cycle of violence.<sup>1</sup> This chapter focuses on the tools that are used by those in the centers of power to perpetuate these patterns and consolidate them to serve their interests in any given context. It also reveals how they stand in the way of achieving positive peace that is based on cooperation and

mutual healing among the marginalized constituencies of the periphery. It argues that the marginalized communities have to take the lead in identifying and dismantling the master's tools.

## **Gendered Violences**

Chapter 2 discussed how its postcolonial association with the mainland strengthened the periphery's patriarchal structures and led to an exaggeration of masculinist identities here. It linked these changes to ethnic conflicts on the one hand, and on the other, to changing gender relations. This section continues focusing on those mutations and their effect, especially on the two most marginalized constituencies of the periphery: the women and the settler/migrant other. The aim is to link the various manifestations of private and intimate forms of violence with larger public and political violences against these marginalized entities. Such linkages illustrate how the binaries constructed around these violences are false; each informs the other. Thus, studying the violence that Rwandan refugees in South Africa suffer in both war and peace, Palmary (2006) reveals how "issues of gender-based violence have occupied a difficult position within post-conflict reconstruction at least in part because violence against women has typically been rendered domestic in contrast to the conflict of war which is considered political." The interconnections between domestic/intimate violence and political/ethnic violence, therefore, need to be highlighted so that those at the centers of power do not get away with condoning one form of violence while perpetrating or valorizing another. There needs to be equal emphasis on tackling both because one form of violence cannot be addressed by ignoring or trivializing the other.

### ***Marginalized Gender***

It is an established fact that in protracted conflict situations, women are the worst sufferers, subjected to different forms of physical, economic, cultural, and psychological violence. In their exploration of women, war, and peace in South Asia, scholars highlight how "women are victims of the physical and psychological violence of dislocation, fragmentation of families, loss of children and men, and the predatory masculinity and misogyny of war, rape and murder" (Manchanda, 2001, 18). Such victimization is consequent upon the patriarchal nature of society and its consequence is, also, a strengthening of society's patriarchal structures. Thus, "violent conflict renders women without men, vulnerable to the predatory masculinities a war culture fosters" (Manchanda, 2001, 21). And since patriarchal structures are ubiquitous, women experience similar violences no matter which side they are on (Manchanda, 2001, 19).

I have earlier discussed how the Indian Security Forces used rape as a weapon of war against the peripheral populations at the height of insurgent

conflicts in the region. The report of the Justice Verma Committee set up in 2013 to review the existing Indian criminal law system also pointed out that “systematic or isolated sexual violence, in the process of Internal Security duties, is being legitimised by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which is in force in large parts of our country” (Verma et al., 2013). The committee was constituted by the Government of India in the aftermath of the 2012 brutal gang rape of a 22-year-old woman in Delhi, which shook the country and directed international attention to India as unsafe for women.<sup>2</sup> Establishing the link between women’s lack of security on the mainland with a similar sense of insecurity and lack of dignity in the country’s “conflict areas,” the report commented on the “impunity for systematic or isolated sexual violence in the process of Internal Security duties” and recommended that all forms of sexual violence against women should be brought under the ambit of ordinary law, instead of providing immunity to the armed forces under martial laws like the AFSPA: “It must be recognized that women in conflict areas are entitled to all the security and dignity that is afforded to citizens in any other part of our country” (*ibid.*).

Because of AFSPA, the rapists and murders of Bhanimai Dutta and Raju Baruah in Assam during the 1990s were never brought to book. These women, once hailed as martyrs, are forgotten in post-insurgency Assam when the men are engaged in peace talks with the State whose armed forces were responsible for their death and dehumanization. Meanwhile, isolated incidents of violence against women by the security forces continue to take place, but they receive only cursory mention and follow-up reports are hardly ever done.<sup>3</sup> Where follow-up reports are done, the official narrative is apparent. The woman’s voice is altogether absent, and if present, it is through the medium of (usually) a male ventriloquist. Thus, in reporting an incident of rape in Bodoland in September 2015, the woman was quoted, directly, as initially accusing two Army personnel of violating her. Subsequently, two alleged informants for the Army, one of them a member of the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), were arrested instead. At this point, the husband is made to speak and the official narrative takes over; the woman’s voice, or her version, is no longer recorded. What is recorded, however, is the Army’s chagrin at having its image tarnished (*The Telegraph*, 2015).

This, then, is the other side of the coin – the successful public diplomacy (or perception management)<sup>4</sup> undertaken by the Indian Armed Forces in the region in recent years. Official narratives go uncontested, and truth becomes the casualty. Women’s bodies continue to remain under the control of one or the other of the two patriarchies. One – the State and its agencies – is actively engaged in co-opting and recruiting the other – the non-State actors like prominent intellectuals, journalists, insurgents, and civil-society leaders – with sops and kickbacks ranging from monetary compensation to promises of publishing poetry collections (field interviews). Clientelist political networks, political opportunism, and neo-patrimonialism are common features in societies exposed to prolonged conflict (Lodge, 2014), which are characterized by

“insecure political and economic environments” (Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith, 2002). While the “big men and lesser men” (Jackson and Rosberg, 1982, 39, cited in Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith, 2002, 3) are thus involved in their mutually advantageous exchanges, the women withdraw more and more from the political spaces.

In the public spaces where they *are* visible, however, they are sexualized and subjected to moral policing and vigilantism. Certain workplaces, for instance, require them to wear some traditional dresses to the exclusion of others, invoking “unwritten” institutional rules. Based on my autoethnographic experience in the public higher education institution where I taught for three years, I discovered how the men (and women) in positions of power subjected younger female professionals’ choice of clothing to constant scrutiny. While the male professors and staff could wear Western, casual attire, the women were constrained to wear only the Axamiyā sador-mekhala, or the mainland Indian sari. Wearing the traditional dresses of the indigenous communities and clothing considered Westernized were disallowed, although there is no dress code inscribed in the official rules of employment. Meanwhile, the students in the higher educational institutions of Assam’s capital city, Guwahati, have assigned uniforms. The girls wear Indian clothing, but are often policed for wearing them inappropriately: “skin-tight clothes” and “transparent clothes (where) one can see their bodies” troubled the principal of one institution while the male students complained: “We can see half the girl’s body when it rains” (*The Telegraph*, 2012).

Defending the male students’ right to air their opinions, the principal (a member of the dominant Axamiyā-Hindu upper caste community) attributed girls’ choice of clothing to influences from tribal/indigenous peoples of the hills: “We should remember that our Assamese culture is different from that of the hill people” (*The Telegraph*, 2012). The woman’s body, thus, symbolizes this sense of differentiation of the dominant Axamiyā-Hindu community from the “other,” be it the “tribal” or the “immigrant.” In 2007, during a political protest by the settler/migrant Adivasi<sup>5</sup> community in Guwahati, a young woman from the community was stripped naked by a violent mob and made to run through the streets of the city in public view. Marginalized, historically oppressed, and poverty-stricken, women from this community have been habitually subjected to sexual exploitation by the other communities of Assam (M. Gogoi, 2020). The disrobing of the Adivasi woman on the streets of the capital city, thus, becomes a means of showing the marginalized “other” its rightful place.

Meanwhile, in the private spaces, women across ethnic and indigenous boundaries face more moral policing, greater patriarchal strictures, and additionally, domestic violence. At home, wives and daughters-in-law have internalized highly patriarchal traditions imported from the mainland. At the most benign, these include Indian Hindu rituals of day-long fasting for the husbands. More vicious are traditions like the dowry system that lead to bride burning, psychological trauma, and murder. Dowry was unheard of among

the Axamiyā people until the recent decades<sup>6</sup> (North East Network, 2004). The tradition of *joutuk* among the Axamiyā Hindus involved the bride's family gifting utility items for the daughter to take to her new home. The women of some indigenous communities, meanwhile, take all their movable assets with them when they leave for the husband's family (*ibid.*). But these were not formalized transactions that led to punitive action if not conducted according to the groom's demands. Official statistics of crimes against women now show that there has been a steady rise in the number of dowry-related deaths in Assam since 2005 (Assam Police, 2019). Meanwhile, among many communities on mainland India, such deaths are common, as dowry is "a socio-cultural practice" and has habitually been "one of the major causes of domestic violence" (Mahjabeen, 2019, 11).

The National Family Health Survey 2019–2020 reports that 32 percent of the surveyed married women between 18–49 years have experienced spousal violence (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2020). However, this number is not conclusive: although "at least 3 out of every 5 women in India face domestic violence," very few report it owing to the "culture of silence" surrounding such violence (North East Network, 2004). Besides, most forms of violence are not perceived as such by the women: "It is mostly physical violence within the household that is recognized as domestic violence. Sexual and psychological violence are not taken into account by a majority of women" (*ibid.*).

Another major cause of non-reporting is fear: "The constant climate of armed conflict engenders an aggressive macho mentality which manifests at all levels, including domestic. The situation is aggravated by the lack of community support systems and the fear of repercussions" (*ibid.*). Women affected by domestic violence are especially terrorized into silence if their husbands are gun-wielding former insurgents. Small weapons and illegal arms are in circulation all over Assam because the State allows former insurgents to retain their weapons "to protect themselves" (A. Hazarika and Sharma, 2014). Testimonies of women who suffer domestic violence from husbands who are former insurgents corroborate the link between institutionalized and personal violence: "Violence is his ideology for self-determination and he uses it as a tool to determine everything on the personal front" (*ibid.*). The State that allows ex-combatants to retain their weapons, therefore, is also responsible for legitimizing domestic violence.

Women in the conflict-affected areas are additionally vulnerable to human trafficking and the sex trade. Internally displaced by conflicts and ethnic riots, women in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps become easy targets of not just the men from their own communities, but from the security personnel who are meant to guard the camps and from the local people who live near the camps. Since these camps are set up in areas inhabited by the ethnic community/ies responsible for instigating and/or perpetrating the riots that led to their displacement in the first place, the fear constantly haunts them (field observations and interviews). Women from these vulnerable communities are

often trafficked to cities within Assam and elsewhere in India (and even to nearby Bhutan) to be used as domestic help or sex workers. Often, the men from their own community are involved in trading them (field observations and interviews). Women, therefore, have no protective mechanisms in place. The trauma and stress they face in the course of ethnic riots and armed conflict are never addressed; they are additionally victimized by their menfolk or by the men from their neighboring communities as well as the military men.

### ***Migrant Other***

While women are the worst affected in conflict-induced internal displacement, entire communities are dehumanized by the experience. Migrant communities are especially vulnerable. During the second phase of the Bodo Movement (1993–2003), for example, Adivasis and Muslims of East Bengali origin were targeted in ethnic cleansing exercises that led to their large-scale displacement. In the riots of 1993, 18,000 people were displaced in Kokrajhar district. Subsequently, in 1996 and 1998, official records state that 202,684 individuals were uprooted (D. C. Kokrajhar, 2000).<sup>7</sup> Assam – and the entire Northeast – has seen several such incidents of conflict-induced displacement. In most cases, the response of the government toward the IDPs follows a similar pattern: immediately after the violence, the district administration sets up temporary relief camps in government buildings. From these cramped quarters, the IDPs are transferred to makeshift shelters built on government land. Eventually, with no rehabilitation forthcoming, these makeshift shelters transform into semi-permanent settlements. These camps sometimes become recruitment grounds for armed groups from the affected community; at other times, the IDPs become easy targets for armed insurgents from other communities to attack.

When the administration eventually wants the IDPs to move on from the settlements (that now look like cramped villages), they are asked to use their small rehabilitation grants (most of which is drained by middlemen); their food, water, and electricity supply is choked off until they are forced to go in search of other places to live. Having lost their livelihoods and, in many cases, their land and identity documents, these migrants become vulnerable to being labeled “illegal” immigrants and persecuted. They float around and sometimes settle in government land or forest areas from which they are likely to be evicted again (U. Goswami, 2006). In recent years, government eviction is emerging as a potent tool of subjugation of marginalized groups, a tool that is also conflict-inducing and inspires violence against vulnerable peoples. Especially since the narrative of these eviction drives is being woven around Muslim immigrants and their purported “illegality,” it has served to alienate this community more and more from the rest of the people of Assam.

In reality, all communities of Assam are equally vulnerable to being evicted arbitrarily – sometimes also from settled land they have been paying revenue for – if their eviction serves specific purposes of those in power.

For example, a 2019 eviction drive on the borders of Karbi Anglong and Hojai districts in Assam targeted what district administrators of Hojai claimed were “cadastral villages mapped by the district revenue department” (Azad, 2019). Meanwhile, Karbi Anglong officials who undertook the drive, claimed these were forest lands. Hojai is a Muslim-majority district and Karbi Anglong is overwhelmingly “tribal,” inhabited largely by the indigenous Karbi who are increasingly Hinduizing. The chief executive member of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) who claimed the eviction was targeted at “illegal immigrants, Bangladeshi Muslims” is a member of the ruling right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that espouses the Hindutva ideology.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, it is not always the Muslim “other” who is targeted in the eviction drives. Indigenous communities were evicted from Amchang in 2017 and 2020 and from Doyang-Tengani in 2002–2003. The peasant-rights organization, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) – which produced Assam’s most vocal opposition leader, Akhil Gogoi – was born in the Doyang-Tengani region of Golaghat district out of a long history of protest against arbitrary eviction policies of successive governments that targeted largely indigenous farmers displaced by flood and land erosion (U. Misra, 2011). In Assam’s Brahmaputra Valley, flood is one of the sustained causes of displacement. Traditionally, “floods were a boon for the Assamese peasantry in several ways” (M. Baruah, 2017, 72); however, “it was only in the past few decades when massive state-led projects, ostensibly aimed at ‘flood control,’ began re-shaping the hydraulic processes in the Brahmaputra Valley that flooding became disastrous” (M. Baruah, 2017, 73). Similarly, riverbank erosion control measures “such as dykes, embankments, spurs and drainages by the Indian state have, in fact, aggravated environmental catastrophes while serving the economic interests of the ruling classes” (M. Baruah, 2017, 71).

M. Baruah’s study (2017) of the “(un)natural disasters” and the role of the State in Assam is based in the Brahmaputra’s largest river island, Majuli. The study illustrates how riverbank erosion in the past four to five decades has drastically reduced the landmass of the island once claimed to be the world’s largest: 64 villages were destroyed and 40 partly eroded by 2013. This caused “massive displacement and outmigration of the local population” (M. Baruah, 2017, 73). While some of the displaced population of Majuli continue to live on the embankments, others moved to different places, like Doyang-Tengani, in search of land and livelihoods (M. Baruah, 2017, 73; U. Misra, 2011, 18). A section of these people also migrated over 217 miles (350 kilometers) to Amchang in the outskirts of Guwahati (Pisharoty, 2017).

The Amchang evictions of 2017 and 2020 targeted mostly indigenous Bodo, Mising, and Rabha people who had been displaced not only from Majuli, but also from the adjoining districts of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. Like the 2021 Sipajhar eviction drive, the Amchang eviction was also violent, inhuman, and dehumanizing:

a posse of 1,500 policemen carried out the eviction on November 27 and 28 with help from around 300 labourers, a dozen elephants and bulldozers and resorted to use of force and violence, causing injury to at least four people. Besides razing down houses, they also demolished schools and places of worship.

(Pisharoty, 2017)

The difference, however, was in the political and public rhetoric surrounding these evictions: this rhetoric targets the migrant community, “other”ing and reducing them to less-than-human status. Thus, in an election rally in 2019, the president of the ruling BJP party referred to the Muslims of East Bengali origin as “illegal migrants” who are “like termites. They are eating the grain that should go to the poor, they are taking our jobs” (Press Trust of India, 2019b).

Such “animalistic dehumanization” is common in racial and ethnic conflicts and “is associated with feelings of disgust and revulsion in the perceiver. ... Targets of animalistic dehumanization tend to be seen as acting from obtuseness or to satisfy some appetitive demand” (Ames and Mason, 2012, 128). This legitimizes interpersonal violence against the migrant community and manifests itself in individual members of society inflicting (seemingly) innocuous everyday acts of “other”ization and racism, like name calling. In extreme instances, it spurs them to perpetrate unspeakable acts of violence against members of that community – like the photographer stomping on the dying man who had been shot at for reacting to police brutality against a young girl during the eviction drive (Syeda, 2021). Meanwhile, the local poor, whose grains the migrants are supposedly eating, are also being evicted under various pretenses; these evictions are “fundamentally premised on a profit-driven and uncritical imagination of ‘development’ [and] usually designed to benefit the extractor, be it the state or its corporate associates” (A. Choudhury, 2020). A 2011 move to evict settlers on the hills around Guwahati city, thus, was ostensibly “to bring back the ecological balance of the city”; however, “the actual reason seemed to be to help some private firms set up multistorey housing complexes and hotels near the settlements” (U. Misra, 2011, 16). The ethnic elites are either complicit or silenced.

In reality, the Muslim migrants of Assam have

contributed to Assam’s agrarian and informal economies by revitalising the lower-tier labour ecosystem. Their investments have been local, much like the outcomes of their physical labour. It is the Assamese people[,] ... who have benefited from their contributions.

(A. Choudhury, 2020)

Time and again, however, they are made the scapegoats. For example, during the first phase of the Bodo Movement (1987–1993), one of the many graffiti that appeared on the city walls of Kokrajhar, the epicenter of the

Movement, was: *Bodo Muslim bhai bhai/Marwarir taka chail/Asamiyār matha chai*. Literally translated, it means: “Bodo and Muslims are brothers, we want the Marwari’s money and the Axamiyā’s head.” In the violence that ensued, a large number of Axamiyā-speaking government employees were brutally killed or forced to leave the area. Casualties included easily available targets like doctors and nurses posted in interior government health centers, and the forest officials. Terrorized, many Axamiyā people fled from what subsequently became the Bodoland Territorial Districts (BTAD). Along with the Axamiyā-speaking community, the Marwari traders from the mainland, who made their wealth by exploiting the local communities and disparaged indigenous cultural mores, were also targeted: they were made to pay regular “taxes” to the militants; some were killed (field interviews).

In those early days of anti-outsider – particularly anti-Axamiyā – sentiment, the Muslims of East Bengali origin were used in various capacities to work for the Bodo activists. In the days when Bodo youths avoided being seen on the streets for fear of atrocities by security personnel, the immigrant Muslims (who had free passage) were used to gather intelligence on military and para-military movement and to get administrative work done by proxy. Procuring rations for underground rebels and issuing them timely warnings were also part of their job description (field interviews).

In 1993, however, a memorandum of settlement was signed between a section of the Bodo leadership and the government of Assam. As power alignments changed in the political centers, the Muslims were targeted in repeated ethnic cleansing exercises by an increasingly militarized, vocally anti-settler Bodo leadership. This was the phase when the demand for an exclusive homeland had gathered an overtly militant overtone and the predominantly anti-Axamiyā attitude among the Bodo leadership had given way to antagonism against settler communities: this antagonism was in keeping with the growing anti-migrant/anti-Muslim rhetoric pervading the rest of Assam. With a new autonomous government installed in BTAD and the ruling party in Bodoland sharing power in the Assam government, Bodoland saw a brief respite from large-scale riots in the first decade of the century. Violence against migrants was renewed, however, in 2008, 2012, and 2014. The following section illustrates how state policies failed to break the cycle of violence; if anything, they contributed to reinventing it relentlessly and entrenching it in society.

## Structures of Violence

### *In Policy*

In the early years of the 1990s, the Bodo Movement faced a leadership vacuum following the death of its charismatic leader, Upendranath Brahma, and the arrest of the leaders of the Bodo Legislature Party (Prabhakara, 1989). In 1993, the State took advantage of this moment of crisis to hastily

draw up the first Bodo Accord, which was signed by the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) that was spearheading the Movement, and by its sister organization, the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC). The accord offered the community a watered-down version of autonomy without any significant devolution of power. Additionally, there were many inconsistencies and flaws inherent in the text of the accord, not the least of which was the confusion over the area it proposed to incorporate under the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) territory (Prabhakara, 1993). With no financial or legislative powers, the BAC was designed to fail. Within a year of signing the accord, its chief executive, Sansuma Khungur Bwismutiary, resigned. In 1996 his successor, Prem Singh Brahma, also resigned and formed the armed group, Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT), to continue the movement for a separate state of Bodoland.

Meanwhile, the accord stated that the government would only consider villages with 50 percent and more of "tribal" population for inclusion in the BAC. Since many villages in the proposed area of Bodoland did not have 50 percent or more "tribal" population, Bwismutiary declared:

This is all our land and non-Bodos have come and settled here from time to time. So changed demography cannot be used against our aspiration for autonomy. If therefore we do not have majority, we might consider creating one.

(Bhaumik, 1995)

Ethnic cleansing thus began in Bodoland and, as previously discussed, settler groups like the Adivasi and the Muslims of East Bengali origin were largely targeted. And this is how, in its bid to consolidate its security and power, the State keeps the periphery in foment, habituating its constituents to endemic conflict. Quick-fix policies and cosmetic changes that are either destined to fail or designed to instigate new conflicts are littered across the conflict history of Assam, and across the Northeast as a whole.

To take another example, like the Bodo Accord, the Assam Accord of 1985 ended the Assam Andolan, but it also continues to incite conflict between communities: it assured protection to the "Assamese people," while failing to provide a definition for the identity label (Government of Assam, 2021). In a multi-ethnic society, this raised questions of inclusion and exclusion of marginalized indigenous and settler/migrant communities. The state's inability to arrive at an official definition of "Assamese people" to this day reflects its reluctance to promote organic peace by recognizing the Axamiyā identity as syncretic and interethnic, with all communities being equal stakeholders in it.

An interethnic identity is one that "transcends the perimeters of a particular ethnic tradition and one that is capable of embracing and incorporating seemingly divergent ethnic elements into one's own unique worldview" (Kim, 2006, 293). Axamiyā developed in pre-colonial times as an identity that incorporates both "individuation" – allowing for "a clear self-definition

and definition of the other” – and “universalization,” which is a “synergistic cognition” that recognizes universal humanity while being aware of the relative nature of values. Such an identity formation helps in overcoming “ethnic parochialism and forming a wider circle of identification” (Kim, 2006, 293–294). Besides, no sole community can claim ownership of the label. With the coming of the colonial rulers, however, there also came a break with Axamiyā interethnicity and the leaders of the Axamiyā nation building process began to advocate more and more the “assimilationist melting pot model” where the other communities joined the dominant “mainstream.” In reality, this was just another form of mono-culturalism being gradually introduced into the discourse. Finally, developments during the Assam Andolan led to the Axamiyā-speaking Hindu community claiming exclusive ownership of the Axamiyā identity (U. Goswami, 2014).

This brought the diverse communities contributing to the interethnic Axamiyā identity into conflict with each other. Most of these communities started distancing themselves from the Axamiyā label and reclaiming their “tribal” identities (Prabhakara, 2005). When the Assam Accord was signed with the representatives of the Axamiyā-speaking Hindu community, smaller ethnic groups began to fear for their rights. Taking advantage of this fear, government agencies at the center helped prop up an armed movement among the Bodos, the only indigenous group large enough in Assam to check the rising power of the Axamiyā-speaking Hindu (S. Hazarika, 1995; U. Goswami, 2014).

As armed insurgencies proliferated in Assam, a cycle of political and public violence – as discussed in the preceding section – was set in motion, perpetuating different and evolving forms of interpersonal and domestic violence. Aiding such interpersonal violence is the State’s policy of allowing former insurgents to retain their weapons. In Bodoland, after the BLT was disbanded and its leaders brought to the negotiating table, its cadres surrendered en masse. However, in the absence of any accurate data, it was impossible to gauge whether the group had also surrendered its entire reserve of arms. Field observations, interviews, and experiences reveal that while small arms are in obvious circulation, undisclosed caches of larger weapons are also hoarded all over Bodoland and its neighboring districts. Political-party workers – mostly young men – are housed in camps that look much like training camps for insurgents, and are locally and unofficially still called “BLT camps,” more than a decade after the disbanding of the armed group (field interviews). During field interviews, former rebels also freely shared their stories of burying their arms in undisclosed locations after “joining the mainstream.” Such availability of illegal weapons does not merely jeopardize public safety on a daily basis, but also fuels the occasional ethnic cleansing and riots, like the ones in 2008, 2012, and 2014.

Between March 2000 and December 2021, Assam reported 2,580 incidents of killing, in which 2,221 civilians, 340 security personnel, 2,354 insurgents, and 150 unspecified individuals lost their lives (SATP, 2021). This is only a

partial picture: a significant number of violent incidents and casualties go unreported from places considered too remote and “dangerous” even by local news stringers and administrative officials (field observations and interviews). Also, it does not reflect the data that is not overtly related to political violence and conflict.

The State is not only aware of but also complicit in this sustained violence that is the outcome of its counter-insurgency policies. In the 1990s, its agencies persuaded a section of the second-rung leadership of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) to surrender. Dubbed the Surrendered ULFA (SULFA), these former rebels were rewarded with huge rehabilitation grants and “soft loans”; some of them were inducted into government undertakings and the security forces. They were also granted amnesty for all crimes committed (Sahni and Routray, 2001). With impunity then, they started indulging in anti-social activities, such as “extortion, intimidation, crimes of extreme violence, and the terrorization of wide sections of the population.” They behaved like “a gigantic organized crime conglomerate that ... abandons its political intent, and that operates substantially under the protection of, and in collusion with, the state and its agents” (Sahni and Routray, 2001). The SULFA played a significant role in the “secret killings” mentioned earlier, acting as informants for the State against their former comrades (A. Choudhury, 2016). These killings marked an “imploding security situation and an exploding fear psychosis amongst the masses” (*ibid.*).

### ***In Public Rhetoric***

Fear makes people wary of potential risks and inhibits their decision-making (Dunning, 2012, 264). Political psychologists also use empirical evidence to reveal how fear inspires “adherence to known situations and avoidance of risk, uncertainty, and novel situations; it tends to cause cognitive freezing, which prevents openness to new ideas” (Bar-Tal, 2001, 604). In the case of Assam, fear motivated the people to move closer to the hypermasculinist nature and polarized/polarizing narrative of the State; it became a coping mechanism, a way of minimizing the threats and protecting themselves. Increasingly, this narrative has been dehumanizing the migrant and the gendered other. The July 2015 “news report” mentioned in the last chapter and aired by a prominent satellite channel of Assam, dehumanized women wearing short skirts by comparing them to monkeys. Additionally, the report filmed the featured women without their consent. The voyeurism implicit in the video caused an uproar in social media. In response to a social media post on the issue, the journalist who had done the report, replied:

I don’t think my work disrespects my mother and sisters. Because, they never show their legs in public. You don’t know about the male psychology. Men are visually stimulated by nature. And culture! Perhaps you

don't know Assamese culture. But shorts are not symbol of 'sobhyo' (the cultured). Get well soon.

(India Today Web Desk, 2015)

Though the management of the news channel did issue an apology, it did not condemn the journalist's approach. The editor-in-chief, who issued the apology on social media, "indirectly appeared to justify the objection to short dresses, saying that some things will never be a part of or be welcomed into Assamese (Axamiyā) society" (India Today Web Desk, 2015).

Just as in the objectification of women, in dehumanizing the migrant, too, the "other" is denied human qualities like individual agency. This frees the dehumanizer from a sense of responsibility or remorse and a commitment to moral strictures; instead, it "unfetters aggression and discrimination; allows people to justify oppressive and violent acts; and bolsters a sense of personal superiority" (Ames and Mason, 2012, 128). Violence, anyway, is internalized as acceptable behavior in conflict-habituated societies. Such societies are "marked by hostility, fear and polarization"; "the enemy-other" is stereotyped and their "statements, behaviors and intentions" misinterpreted. Overall, "these systems are characterized by a lack of trust, communication, and connection" (Diamond, 1997, 369–370). Against this backdrop and aggravating the existing fissures between the communities, the Indian State has weaponized fear in Assam's (and the Northeast's) conflict-habituated environment.

Increasingly, in the course of its post-independence association with the periphery, the State magnified the fissures and differences between communities till resistance against itself was de-escalated. Original grievances were watered down, and attention diverted from the complexity of the conflicts that involved access to resources, threats to livelihood, demographic changes, loss of language and culture, environmental degradation and the impact of climate change, among others. In the post-insurgency period, these complex causes have been reduced to simple binary narratives: tribal versus non-tribal, Hindu versus Muslim, indigenous versus settler. This has created a conducive environment for the consolidation of the dichotomic and polarizing Hindutva ideology.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), that espouses "a Hindu majoritarian polity" (A.P. Chatterji et al., 2019, 1) in India and inspires the ruling right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has been working silently in the Northeast for decades. The RSS/BJP first established their base in Assam in 1946 and founded schools, engaged in relief work, and organized conferences, where they vocalized against Christian proselytization and Muslim immigration (Longkumer, 2019, 285). Since 2014, when it emerged as the single largest political party in India after winning the general election (Longkumer, 2019, 281), the BJP has been assuming political prominence in the Northeast as well – even in the Christian majority states like Mizoram and Nagaland. It formed governments in nearly all eight states of the region, with or without

regional alliances. Pursuing in the periphery its nationalizing vision of an *Akhand Bharat* (Unbroken India), it even adapted its image of Mother India to cater to the Northeast's indigenous peoples: in Tripura in 2017, women from different tribes and communities were recruited to pose as Bharat Mata (Mother India) in their traditional attires for BJP posters (Chakravarty, 2017b).

In Assam, the BJP has exercised sole power since 2016; prior to that, it was in alliance with the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) which comprised largely of the Assam Andolan leadership. In that time, the BJP has intensified its push to Hinduize the state, co-opting Axamiyā national icons as Hindu heroes. Thus, Lachit Barphukan, the Ahom general who defended the Ahom kingdom against Mughal invasion from the Indian mainland, is hailed as defending a Hindu kingdom against an invading Muslim army: the Ahoms traditionally practice the Phra Lung religion, although their kings embraced several versions of Hinduism over their six-century rule (P. Gogoi, 1968). Lachit Barphukan led the decisive battle of Saraighat (1671) between the Ahoms and Mughals; political campaigners for the party termed the BJP's sweeping 2016 election victory in Assam (after which it won another term in 2020) as "The Last Battle of Saraighat" (Sethi and Shubhrastha, 2017). In invoking this battle, the BJP was referring to its election promise to oust "illegal" Muslim immigrants.

The Hindu-Muslim divide, which created the two nations of India and Pakistan when the colonizers left, has historically shaped the mainland's binary narrative. This narrative is being superimposed now on the public and political rhetoric of Assam. Assam's distinctive history of plurality and multi-ethnicity is subsumed in this narrative which is irrevocably congealing the "other"ness of the Muslims of East Bengali origin. One of the ways in which this is being done is by invoking the encroachment of the land owned by the *xattras* of Assam. Traditionally, *xattras* are religious institutions around which the community life of Assam was centered; they originate in the medieval religion of Ek Xaran Naam Dharma, propounded by Assam's spiritual leader, Xankardeb, after he traveled through different parts of (what is now) India. Xankardeb's religion of belief in the One was a rejection of traditional, "mainstream" Hinduism. It gave refuge (*xaran*) to anyone who sought it, including Muslims and non-Hindu indigenous peoples who were disparaged and considered "impure" in the orthodox Hindu universe (Taher, 1991, 40).

Ironically, this same religion is being appropriated by the Hindutva forces today. The BJP came to power in Assam promising to evict Muslim migrants who are purportedly encroaching on *xatra* land (Sentinel Digital Desk, 2019). The *xattras*, meanwhile, are becoming increasingly Hinduized and embracing the state's narrative. Most of them are "bastions of high caste Hindus" which "explains the influence that these institutions and their leaderships have on the state and political processes in general" (M. Baruah, 2017, 80).

The Muslims of East Bengali origin moved within British India, from East Bengal to Assam, in the nineteenth century. In the absence of regulated borders and effective immigration laws, and propelled by political disturbances and climate disasters, their migration continued in postcolonial times. Within Assam, they continue to be displaced by acts of ethnic violence, or when the riverine land which they – like some indigenous communities – habitually settle and cultivate becomes eroded or flooded. When they move to a new place, they are perceived as new migrants and, today, every visibly identifiable Bengali Muslim person is considered an “illegal Bangladeshi” in Assam’s popular parlance. Meanwhile, different sources estimate the number of actual Bangladeshi migrants in the state to be anywhere between negligible and none to thousands “infiltrating” every day.

In the absence of clarity, the fear of demographic swamping and loss of livelihood appears real. Hate and fear are closely related sentiments, especially at the intergroup level. Both emotions incite violence. Incidents of collective violence against this community are littered across the history of Assam; they occurred across the state in Chaulkhowa Sapori and Nellie during the Assam Andolan and in Bashbari and Khagrabari during the Bodo Movement. However, religion was never the sole or primary factor inciting such direct violence or inspiring (seemingly) innocuous everyday acts of “other”ization: Assam’s settler-indigenous conflicts are more about nativism and access to land, livelihood, and resources. On the ground, these continue to be the main causes of conflict between the East Bengali migrants and their neighboring communities. The popular and political narrative, however, tells it differently, especially under the current ruling regime.

## Tools of Violence

Language is one of the most potent tools of cultivating “other”ness. Words can shape and reinforce narratives of collective victimization and transgenerational victimhood (A. Fischer et al., 2018): even though most Axamiyā-speaking people are no longer associated with cultivation and the land, and prefer to educate their children in mainland cities, or migrate to different countries in search of better livelihood, these narratives make them feel threatened by those who are in reality, farming the lands and feeding them and the economy. When reiterated often enough, words can also convince us about the evil, immutable disposition of the “other” (A. Fischer et al., 2018). The “illegal” migrant ceases to be an individual human being; they become their collective identity: “land-hungry” criminals, breeding continuously, taking over the language and culture of the indigenous and autochthonous (Sentinel Digital Desk, 2021; Sinha, 1998).

When a narrative of fear and a rhetoric of victimization come together, they inspire the shared negative emotions of contempt, disgust, anger, humiliation, and revenge (A. Fischer et al., 2018, 317). These shared emotions comfort the in-group, indicating a strengthening of ties within the community; and this is

especially reassuring in the immediate aftermath of violent intergroup conflicts. As the collective attention of entire communities is, thus, diverted from the fissures within themselves, they tend to overlook everyday problems of governance and unmet basic human needs. The government, meanwhile, continues to target all marginalized communities irrespective of indigeneity, origin, or religion to serve various purposes, like the interests of corporate cronies. Thus, despite stiff resistance, about 54 families from three revenue-paying villages in Kamrup district have been shortlisted for eviction from their land and homestead. The proposed “development” of the Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi Airport Guwahati on the city outskirts by a private corporation close to the ruling government has threatened these indigenous and autochthonous villages: in the proposed displacement, the Koitaxiddhi *xattra* – that has been at the center of the spiritual life of the people in the area since it was established in 1804 – is also facing demolition (Pratidin Special Correspondent, 2021; field interviews).

It is common in conflict-habituated societies for people to “hold derogatory or de-humanized views of ‘the other’, which are enhanced in the media and in political and educational discourses” (Diamond, 1997, 366). The preceding section discusses how such dehumanization happens at the policy level and, because it becomes systemized, it trickles down to popular practice and parlance. Those at the centers of power sustain these hate-filled systems by weaponizing fear. Fear and distrust create “negative or broken relationships” where people do not have an opportunity to heal from the wounds of conflict either individually or collectively (Diamond, 1997, 366). By keeping relationships broken, human – and humane – relationships are prevented from developing between communities in conflict.

Fear, thus, “functions as a technology of governance: the sovereign power either uses fear to make others consent to that power, or civil society promises protection, and the elimination of fear, to ensure consent” (Ahmed, 2004, 71). It is the people lower down in the social and ethnic hierarchies – the poor and marginalized – who suffer the consequences of this technology, while those in positions of power, even within peripheral populations, remain untouched. In Assam, the function of fear and the consequences of its weaponization can be closely studied by tracing the long history of the National Register of Citizenship (NRC).

The NRC was a classified document created in 1951 using census data that – as the census superintendent himself admitted – had various gaps. For one, it was hastily written by “unqualified or ill-qualified persons” (Roychoudhury, 1981, 267). Secondly, it did not necessarily include the names of all the members of a household:

In areas inhabited by immigrant Muslims the household of a rich man may include servants and agricultural workers and others over and above the members of the family. The names of these men might not be included in the Register.

(ibid.)

Since it was not available in the public domain, nor could it be used as evidence in a court of law, “no indication was given to the people of the terrible consequences which might overtake them at some future date if their names were not included in the National Register of Citizens, 1951” (*ibid.*). Yet, the leaders of the Assam Andolan demanded that the detection and deportation of “foreign nationals” be done on the basis of this flawed document.

Successive governments failed to initiate the process of updating the NRC to include the names of people who entered Assam after 1951. The Axamiyā leadership has been vocally pushing for it since 1985, when the Assam Accord guaranteed that “for purposes of detection and deletion of foreigners, 1.1.1966 shall be the base date and year” (Government of Assam, 2021). After the BJP government came to power, though, the process gained momentum and in August 2019, the list of citizens was published: nearly two million residents of Assam were excluded from the NRC, a large number of whom were Muslims, but not exclusively (EPW Editorial, 2019).

More than a year after the NRC was drafted, however, the government is yet to formally notify or reject it (Bhat and Yadav, 2021). The NRC is caught in litigation demanding reverification (P. Kalita, 2021), even as the lives of the NRC-excluded people are “stuck in a limbo” (Karmakar, 2020). For one, those who pinned their hopes on disenfranchising a large section of the Muslim, allegedly “illegal,” migrants found the numbers of those declared non-citizens to be too small: 31.1 million could verify their citizenship while 19,06,657 people were left out of the register<sup>9</sup> (P. Kalita, 2021). The BJP was disappointed “due to the exclusion of a large number of individuals from the groups constituting its social and electoral base,” namely, Bengali Hindu migrants from East Pakistan<sup>10</sup> (EPW Editorial, 2019). Of the three districts of the Bengali-majority Barak Valley of Assam, around 15 percent of the applicants were excluded from the NRC in the Hindu majority district of Cachar; in contrast, inclusions in Muslim majority Karimganj and Hailakandi districts were 92.33 percent, and 91.96 percent, respectively (Special Correspondent, 2019). Besides, the number of NRC-excluded people is “substantially less than the claims and rhetoric of the proponents” of the NRC (EPW Editorial, 2019). The head of the NGO, Assam Public Works (APW), whose 2009 petition prompted the Supreme Court to direct the center to update the NRC, claimed that 8 million people fraudulently included their names in the register (P. Kalita, 2021). The Government of Assam also demanded reverification of 20 percent of the data from the districts bordering Bangladesh and 10 percent from the rest of the districts; APW demanded reverification in 20 of Assam’s 33 districts (P. Kalita, 2021).

The process of citizenship verification had been made very rigorous and cumbersome for the people of Assam. In 2015, all families in Assam were given a limited amount of time to find “legacy data” or proof of residence in Assam prior to 24 March 1971 (NRC, Assam, 2014). Those who could locate these documents had to stand in serpentine queues at service centers or

deal with a complicated online process of submitting documents. Thereafter, contending with misspelt names, incorrect data entries, inaccurate “legacy codes,” and arbitrary exclusions of some family members constituted part of the extremely stressful process of proving one’s Indian citizenship (Dowerah, 2018). If this was the situation for Axamiyā-speaking, educated middle class people, one can only imagine what the experience must have been like for the illiterate, poor, and otherwise marginalized people.

Many lost their documents in the course of forced migration and internal displacement; many – especially local and indigenous people – never felt the need for paperwork. Often, women who were married off or trafficked had no documents to show, and about 20,000 transgender people, estranged from their families, had no access to legacy data (D. Sharma, 2019). Between February 17 to June 6, 2018, close to 1 million “family tree hearings” and “special hearings” were conducted across Assam to verify married and far-off relatives. These hearings were sometimes located great distances away from the residences of the applicants: “Many families had to sell their livestock or other belongings to meet the travel and accommodation expenses to appear at the hearings” (S. Talukdar, 2019). Meanwhile, those stripped of their citizenship by the process are living in constant fear of being incarcerated indefinitely in the inhumane detention camps; some have been driven to suicide (Bhaumik, 2019).

### **Breaking the Habit of Violence**

Amidst all this uncertainty, fear, and bleakness, however, a few lessons can be drawn from the experience of the East Bengali migrant community during the NRC exercise. One of the reasons why more people from the community were not excluded from the NRC – despite the system being skewed against them – was because the entire community rallied around the poor and illiterate sections to raise awareness, help with the complicated application process, and pressurize the government and the NRC Service Centers to follow proper procedure. Student bodies like the All Assam Muslim Students’ Union (AAMSU) and the All BTC Minority Students’ Union, besides literary organizations like the Char Chaporí Sahitya Parishad (CCSP), became involved. There were also individual initiatives that helped: an unofficial NRC helpline web portal was created through private initiative for a cross-community organization called Citizen Support Group (Ghiyasuddin, 2015).

Additionally, AAMSU has been providing legal aid to those who need help proving their citizenship. They also petitioned the government on behalf of IDPs who could not produce documents; AAMSU pointed out that

there are some documents that are not even available in government records. The copy of the 1951 NRC, for example, is not available in the relevant departments of the Government of India and the Government

of Assam in many districts. If the government could not preserve these documents, it is natural that ordinary people may not have been able to either.

(Rahman, 2021, 100)

The marginalized and peripheralized are never without agency. Solidarity among the oppressed is agency. It is a kind of power that strengthens those who might otherwise feel or seem helpless. Because of their “socialisation and historical experience of unequal relations” (Manchanda, 2001, 10), the afflicted know oppression and the “structure of power relations” (*ibid.*) when they see it. As such, they are also best suited to take the lead in calling out the oppressors and identifying their tools of oppression. In conflict-habituated societies, to break the cycle of violence, it is important to dismantle these tools. However, in an intricately entangled network of peripheries and marginalized entities like Assam’s, this is not possible without mutual cooperation. The will to create positive peace mutually will benefit all communities equally through “mutual learning to heal past violence and prevent future violence” (Galtung and Fischer, 2013, 12). Axamiyā society as a whole, therefore, comprising all the communities that inhabit the state, must critically examine their long history of conflict, violence, marginalization, and colonialization.

To begin with, they must unravel the historical patterns of power relationships. In the core-periphery network, power, patriarchies, and marginality work relationally, and relationships of power are in constant flux. Within this network, power – and oppressive force – does not merely flow top down in a fixed hierarchy of relations. Especially in multi-ethnic conflict-habituated societies, although a disproportionate amount of power resides in a dominant center, the marginalized communities of the dependent periphery are tied together in interrelationships of interdependence. During the Assam Andolan, updating the NRC to identify foreign nationals was an “unimaginative and short-sighted” demand made by the Andolan leadership, but it was a desperate attempt at remedying “the unaddressed concerns of the local communities in respect of their land and livelihood” (Thomas, 2019). No remedy was forthcoming for more than three decades as the periphery’s conflictual relation with the mainland continued. During these years, the patriarchal structures within the periphery strengthened, informed by conflict habituation. As power alignments between the mainland and the periphery’s patriarchies started shifting in the post-insurgency period, the desperation of the dominant community mutated into complicity in “other”ing and violently targeting the more marginalized communities lower down in the ethnic hierarchy.

Against an examination of this history of growing xenophobia and brutalization of society, the communities of Assam must acknowledge and remember their victimhood. The aim is to recognize the processes and patterns of victimization so as to identify and dismantle the tools used to prevent solidarity among the victims. Confronting their own history will help them overcome

the fear of the “other,” who is also a victim of the same history. This will allow a departure from habitual violence and encourage existing structures to move from exerting “power over” to sharing “power with.” Self-reflection and a conscious effort at change will facilitate community-driven peacebuilding. To sustain this peace, the people of Assam must demand equitable land laws, effective disaster-management systems, and adequate rehabilitation policies, as well as workable systems guided by humane and fair immigration laws that uphold the human rights and dignity of citizens and non-citizens alike.

## Notes

- 1 Conflict, according to Galtung (2007, 22–23) is the functioning of the ABC sequence (attitude, behaviour, and contradiction or incompatibility of goals) among the parties in conflict.
- 2 Several changes were introduced in the Indian legal system following the incident and subsequent public protests. The Justice Verma Committee report set in motion a series of judicial reforms in India addressing women and social justice.
- 3 During interviews, veteran journalists who covered the Northeast at the peak of violent conflicts speak of the growth of embedded journalism and lazy reportage based on official press handouts rather than on investigation and fact-checking. There is, of course, no existing literature to substantiate these claims. As a former journalist and media person, I have reflected on public platforms how these developments are closely connected to the limitations that media persons face in the conflict zone: from gaps in training on conflict reporting and gender sensitivity to the total lack of guarantees of personal safety and job security.
- 4 Goldman (2004, 149) draws a distinction between public diplomacy and perception management. Public diplomacy, according to her “does not, as a rule, involve falsehood and deception, whereas these are important ingredients of perception management.” On the other hand, “perception management” is a euphemism for “an aspect of information warfare … the purpose is to get the other side to believe what one wishes it to believe, whatever the truth may be.”
- 5 “Adivasi” literally means “original inhabitant,” and is an umbrella term used to denote the Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Gond, Khond, Kisang, Nagesia, Savara, Godova, Proja, Pankha, Lohar, Ghasi, Turi, and Baurie communities. These “tribal” groups from “mainland” India migrated to Assam since the late nineteenth century in search of arable lands and were also brought – often forcibly – to the state as indentured laborers by European tea planters.
- 6 “[A]mongst the predominantly Bengali majority areas in Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj,” however, dowry has been prevalent and “a major cause of concern” (North East Network, 2004).
- 7 A small number of migrant Nepali people besides indigenous Rabha people were also displaced in these violent incidents.
- 8 “The twentieth-century discourse of Hindutva” aims at “cultivating a unified Hindu theology for a monothematic religious passion and inventing a concomitant organic nationhood” (Basu, 2020, 5).
- 9 This number also included “those who did not submit claims” (Parashar, 2020), and “indigenous applicants as well as migrants from other States in India” (S. Talukdar, 2019).

10 “Disaggregation of NRC data into religion and language categories is not possible as such pieces of information were not collected from the NRC applicants at any stage. The NRC authorities have also not released district-wise disaggregated data of the final list. However, specific stories of exclusions reported by the media and allegations by political parties and organisations, have given rise to the perception that Hindu and Muslim migrants from East Bengal as well as from erstwhile East Pakistan constitute the majority of those excluded. The ruling BJP has a large electoral stake among Bengali Hindus in the State, who include migrants from erstwhile East Bengal.” (S. Talukdar, 2019).

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## 4 Women Underground

### Marginal, Peripheral?

#### Introduction

The previous chapter focused on two marginalized constituencies of the periphery: women and the migrants of East Bengali origin. It examined how multiple patriarchies of power interact to emphasize, sustain, and often violently reinforce their marginalization in Assam's ethnic and social hierarchy. This chapter focuses on the women of Assam who, like the migrant Muslim community, are among the most marginalized and dehumanized constituencies, but who, unlike the migrants, were not always denied power and agency. Their gradual erosion of agency is put under scrutiny here to reiterate the arguments in the two preceding chapters: Chapter 2 argued that the periphery's post-independence conflictual association with the mainland led to a gradual strengthening of patriarchal structures here and this, in turn, led to mutations of gendered relations. Chapter 3 then traced how these mutations dehumanized the marginalized while brutalizing the ones at the centers of power. Both chapters established, however, that these margins and centers are not constant; rather, they are constantly shifting. Chapter 3 also briefly examined how, within these shifting power relationships, the marginalized entities exercise agency. Power, after all, is not a top-down flow, but a matrix in which each component has agency and is "in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (Foucault, 1980, 98).

This chapter will inquire why – despite a strong and visible history of political activism and their active participation in ethno-nationalist movements – the women of Assam are invisible in public politics and platforms of post-insurgency political reconciliation and reconstruction. In the militarized, hyper-masculinized periphery, the marginalized women are kept away from anti-war activism and from public policy- and decision-making forums. They are also subjected to the violences of peace and war: the gendered analysis in the last chapter of the many forms of violence that occur in conflict-habituated societies revealed how the militarization and hyper-masculinization connect the violences of the state with mutating social relations increasingly characterized by interpersonal and public forms of

violence. In this, it revealed as false the “public–private” dichotomy applied to understanding and addressing conflicts.

Given this interrelation, existing literature on women in conflict and war establishes that in militarized societies, “women are more likely to see a continuum of violence” which gives them “special insights into the structure of unequal relations at the root of conflict” (Manchanda, 2001, 17). It also argues that as “the public sphere of men collapses” in the face of militarization, “violent conflict opens up for women the public sphere predominantly controlled by men” (Manchanda, 2001, 17). To a large extent, this holds true of the women in Assam’s neighboring states of Nagaland and Manipur. In Nagaland, despite being kept away from public politics and decision-making bodies, Naga women have appropriated public space “through their involvement with and domination of peace movements.” Peace workers from the Naga Mothers Association (NMA), for one, have been at the forefront of initiating dialogues with the government as well as rebel groups to stop violence and killings (P. Banerjee, 2000, 139–140). In a region where most peace groups, particularly women’s, do not survive for long – the Matri Manch (Mother’s Front) of Assam lasted a year – “an extraordinary feature of the peace groups in Nagaland is their longevity” (P. Banerjee, 2000, 141).

In Manipur, similarly, women’s groups have traditionally taken upon themselves the burden of protecting their communities: during the long years of violent conflict and militarization, they could be seen carrying torches and patrolling the streets at night to warn their communities against raids by security forces (Manchanda, 2005, 15). In 2004, a young woman, Thangjam Manorama, was brutally raped and killed in custody, her genitals mutilated, her body found riddled with multiple gunshots. The women’s organizations launched several sustained protests demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA), which sanctioned such crimes with impunity. The impunity is reflected in the fact that despite these strong protests, it took 10 years for a judicial report on the circumstances of her death to be made public (Rajagopal, 2016); and despite the intervention of the Supreme Court of India, nobody has been prosecuted yet (R. Banerjee, 2020). There are severe limitations, therefore, to the success and change-making abilities of the women’s movements in these states of the Northeast. They have not, however, relinquished the public spaces altogether as the women of Assam seem to have done, and in so doing, lost out on the opportunity to build feminist solidarities among themselves and/or in collaboration with the women of the rest of the region.

This book started from a place of anger and hopelessness at this seeming loss – or renunciation – of women’s agency in Assam. As my research progressed, I dug deeper into what was preventing the women from organizing along feminist lines. I found that the masculinist structures of ethnic domination and subjugation, collusion and resistance, inform hierarchies of power between the women as well. Though disillusioned, I persisted in my inquiry and entered some of the marginal spaces where the invisible women now live.

Happily, in these spaces that they created away from the masculinized public and political platforms, I found that some women are quietly creating a new reality during conflict and making positive peace through powerful yet non-confrontational ways that are also redefining gendered relationships. They are subverting, challenging, or circumventing the hypermasculinist structures and nexus of oppression in their own way, from within, and what is more, they are doing this without outside intervention. This chapter elaborates how the women of Assam are creating this new reality and suggests that they hold up lessons for centers and peripheries of power that are engaged in conflictual relationships globally.

## Women in Public Politics

The indigenous communities of Assam have a strong historiography of bold, defiant, and sometimes martial women who have become the stuff of legends. For example, the Karbis recall Kareng Rongpharpi, who struck back against the Kachari<sup>1</sup> king's tyranny (Teron, 2021, 147). The Bodo leader, Thengfakhri, a superb horse rider and sword wielder, worked for the British administration before joining the anti-colonial movement in the late nineteenth century (I. Goswami, 2015). In fact, Assam's women across all communities, indigenous and autochthonous, played a crucial role in the anti-colonial movement. The formation of *mahila samitis* (women's collectives) in the early part of the twentieth century marked the emergence of organized women's groups in modern Assam. Earlier, informal collectives of women like the *namoti dols*, or women who offered *naam* (religious prayers) together, were prominent in the social life of Assam: "[T]his is characteristic of women's traditional and collective work pattern, demonstrated by agricultural practices and farm work (weaving, rearing mulberry and *eri* silkworms, livestock responsibilities, and so on) – women have always worked collectively" (Behal, 2021, 186).

The women organized locally through the *mahila samitis* to advocate for social issues like education and widow remarriage. They also collaborated nationally with larger groups such as the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), one of the first all-women's organizations in India. When the Indian National Congress (INC)-led independence movement reached Assam, they also joined the local arm of the INC, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC), and formed the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (APMS). They organized and mobilized people to participate in the freedom movement. Women, especially, worked toward raising awareness about Mahatma Gandhi's "principles of non-violence, tolerance, and self-sacrifice, some of the basic tenets of womanhood" (Behal, 2021, 186). Some – like Kanaklata Barua, Tileswori Baruah, and Tunuki Das – lost their lives in challenging the British government during Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement (*ibid.*).

Since the anti-colonial movement, then, the women of Assam were allowed space in the public political domain so they could be confined to “womanly” forms of protest and activism. In fact, such activism was encouraged by the patriarchs of the periphery. This was in imitation of the mainland’s “nationalist resolution of the women’s question” where the social space was divided “into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world.” While the *bahir* or outside world was the male bastion, the home “must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation” (Chatterjee, 1989, 624). In this social space, the women were expected to guard the “inner values” of their respective communities and remain subservient to the male leaders. Women’s organizations, therefore, nearly exclusively involved themselves with social welfare activities and community drives against “social evils.” Conversations with representatives of women’s groups I interacted with in workshops and on the field reveal how this tradition has continued unbroken; to this day, their activism is primarily limited to moral policing and social reformation in their respective societies.

There have been times, of course, when the women of Assam rebelled against the patriarchs of the periphery and fought their own battles. Despite their active participation in public life, the women of colonial Assam were constrained to sit separately from the men in public forums. This happened during the annual convention of the All Assam Sahitya Sabha, the apex literary body that has traditionally provided – and continues to provide – the ideological and intellectual backdrop for collective action in Assam. In protest, activist and writer Chandraprabha Saikiani emerged from behind the bamboo screens where the women were relegated: she was perhaps the first woman in Assam to speak from a public platform. Inspired by her outburst, some of the women present tore down the screens and stamped on them in a symbolic gesture of liberation. Saikiani was bold and outspoken in public and she broke many social taboos in her personal life as well (A. Sarma, 2011). She was among the trailblazers in the struggle for women’s emancipation in Assam – however under-recognized the struggle may have been.

Women cutting across ethnic boundaries participated – often, ferociously – in the peasants’ movement that started in 1947 when sharecroppers (*adhiars*) and landless peasants began demanding lower rents on land and a higher share of the produce. Coinciding with India’s celebration of independence on 15 August, “a few — probably less than a hundred — *adhiars* and landless peasants, making a symbolic protest, took out street demonstrations in the town of Guwahati” (A. Saikia, 2014, 2). Since the 1920s, a communist-led movement had been underway on mainland India. The Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), that believed in armed struggle to liberate the peasants, had established itself in Assam in 1939. It was formed in 1938 in neighboring Bengal to establish a movement of the peasants, laborers, and middle class, and reject India’s Constituent Assembly that, it alleged, was preparing the grounds to transfer power from the British to the hands of the

Indian bourgeoisie (A. Saikia, 2014, 135). By 1949, the government of Assam wrote to the center:

The communist activities ... have taken a shape of exciting the more ignorant section of the people of this province (and they are many) into acts of violence against the constituted authority, under some plea or other and in a few places they have been successful. But all of them have been put down.

(G. N. Bardoloi, 1949, cited in A. Saikia, 2014, 1)

An undeclared war followed. The struggling sharecroppers and landless peasants cleared forest and government lands for cultivation and encroached on European tea plantations. Such insurgent activities were spontaneous and, often, locally mobilized without the involvement of the communist parties. The government sided with the oppressive landlords and landowners (A. Saikia, 2014, 2–3). Repressive measures were taken: “[P]easant activists were arrested and harsh physical punishment was meted out to some of them” (A. Saikia, 2014, 3). Large-scale eviction of sharecroppers, lawsuits, and police brutality continued until 1950–1951, when some of the communist leaders joined electoral politics. While their leaders became legislators, very little changed for the peasants on the ground. Land reform laws were introduced all over India in the 1950s, but in the absence of proper implementation, the peasants could not benefit from the new legislations (A. Saikia, 2014, 294). Rural discontent continued to grow and the farmers actively mobilized themselves until the 1970s. The Assam Andolan and its aftermath, however, completely changed the rural landscape of Assam and the peasant movement took a different turn (A. Saikia, 2014, 3–4).

In this long, but barely studied and nearly erased history of the peasants' struggle in Assam, women played a leading role. They were not just force multipliers, but stakeholders: in November 1953, a peasant group, the Uttarpar Krishak Sanmilan (UPKS), demanded that “women harvesters be legally allowed to retain one-sixth to one-eighth of the produce” (A. Saikia, 2014, 302). Just as they labored in the fields alongside the men, they also actively – sometimes very violently – participated in the struggle for their rights. They participated as units that “were loosely organized groups meant for carrying localized anti-landlord activities” (A. Saikia, 2014, 264). Their successes inspired the pan-India communist parties to subsume them as separate wings in their organizational structure. But Assam's women, both from the Axamiyā-Hindu and indigenous communities, continued to express their independent views, sometimes even presiding over community meetings (A. Saikia, 2014, 264). On several occasions, they also militantly resisted police atrocities on the villagers: instances of women's assault on police forces were officially recorded and the police resisted arresting the women fearing escalation of such assaults (A. Saikia, 2014, 263).

Assam's women participated with the same fervor and ferocity in the Assam Andolan (1979–1985). Women's rights activist A.P. Hazarika (2021) recalls childhood memories of women functioning as human shields to protect "the boys" from the atrocities of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). They would stop the trains carrying Assam's resources out to the mainland by lying down on rail tracks. This time, though, the confrontation was with the Indian State. The measures taken to suppress the movement were more brutal. In 1980, peaceful demonstrators outside oil installations at Duliajan were fired at without provocation; four people died, many women were seriously injured. Earlier that year, Indian Army personnel raped at least 17 women and molested 23 – some of whom were pregnant – in North Kamrup. Several were beaten mercilessly (Barthakur and Goswami, 1990, 219–220).

Following the Duliajan and North Kamrup incidents, the leadership of the movement organized anti-oppression days and highlighted the atrocities against the women (Barthakur and Goswami, 1990, 220). Being the periphery's patriarchs, though, they were already strengthening themselves in imitation of the mainland's machismo. Their all-pervasive masculinist politics soon subsumed the women's issues and their activism; nation, identity, culture, and the attendant symbolism increasingly played a central role in the political protests. Taunted by the state's chief secretary for hiding behind the women like cowards, the leadership urged more women to join the movement (Barthakur and Goswami, 1990, 221). But when they did, their participation "was limited and internal discussions with 'the boys' or strategic planning with the leaders was scant" (Behal, 2021, 184). After the Assam Accord was signed in 1985, only one out of 126 legislative assembly seats went to a woman in the new government formed by "the boys" (Barthakur and Goswami, 1990, 227).

While the Assam Andolan was underway, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) had, in the meantime, armed itself to fight for an independent, sovereign Assam. According to a study conducted by the North East Network (NEN), in the ULFA "the ratio of women cadres to men is 2:10." The study also finds that "the ratio of women to men who are in the ceasefire/SoO category is 350 to 2650." Twelve ULFA women combatants are on record as having surrendered between January 1, 2007 and June 30, 2012, and 27 between April 2006 and September 2008 (A.P. Hazarika and Sharma, 2014, 5). Many of these women joined the insurgent group to fight for an ideology but found themselves replicating their habitual gendered roles in the day-to-day functioning of the rebel camps. Field interviews and conversations with women cadres reveal that their role "underground" was to cook, clean, launder, and look after the children. Kaberi Kachari Rajkhowa, the wife of the ULFA chairperson, said during an interview that she, like some of the other women, also functioned as teachers and instructors on political ideology to the cadres. Teaching is considered a "safe" profession for women in mainstream society as well. The highest female functionary in the ULFA's organizational set-up was Pranati Deka, the cultural secretary.

Similarly, none of the ethno-nationalist insurgent groups of Assam allow decision-making roles to women. In any case, very few of them allow membership for women cadres. Where they do – as in the ULFA or the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) – the women are allowed to take combat training, but when there is an ambush or war-like situation, they only constitute the second line of defense/offence (field interviews with women cadres). The armed groups, meanwhile, use women's civil society organizations as fronts to propagate their agenda and help them in many ways. The women's organizations of Assam have, by and large, functioned as subsidiaries of these larger, male-dominated bodies, rather than as equal partners. For instance, the All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) was an organization that took active part in the Bodo Movement, but it was formed under the initiative of the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) that led the Movement. ABWWF provided them with logistical and tactical support. Its members acted as messengers for ABSU activists and other leaders of the Bodo Movement. Some were used as carriers of bombs and weapons for the militant faction of the Bodo leadership and, subsequently, by insurgent groups like the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) (field interviews).

In the post-insurgency period, though, the role of the ABWWF remained confined to campaigning against social evils like alcoholism and eve-teasing and policing women's bodies. Similar is the case with the Dimasa and Karbi women's organizations: activists interviewed in the field describe how they break liquor bottles in the marketplace and impose "decency" on the women of their own community. Like most civil society organizations of Assam, these women's organizations also label themselves "apolitical." This myth of being "apolitical" – because of not being involved directly in electoral politics – serves to keep the women away from public politics, which remains "men's politics" (Connell, 2005, 204). So, while the women continue to be the conscience keepers and moral police of their communities, the men negotiate for autonomy and self-rule and subsequently take charge of governance. Thus, despite the ABWWF's immense contribution to the Bodo Movement, when the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) was created in 2003 and elections were held to the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2006, not a single woman was allowed to contest the elections.

## **Women Fragmented**

In the overwhelmingly androcentric histories of Assam's political life and resistance, the women are uncritically celebrated for remaining within their gendered and marginal capacities, thus reinforcing the masculinist narrative. Historical narratives centering women's agency are few, those told from the women's perspectives are fewer. Thus, documented accounts of women's participation in Assam's anti-colonial movement, both at the local and all-India levels, are sparse and mostly confined to personal archives (Behal, 2021, 187). Discussions of women's activism during the peasant movement – like

the peasant movement itself – are absent: the relatively few historiographies of women's activism in Assam skip this crucial chapter in Assam's post-independence association with India. Historian A. Saikia's book on Assam's peasant politics (2014, 1) "departs from the earlier narratives and tells the untold stories which played a significant role in defining the trajectory of modern Assam." In less than ten pages, the book pieces together the narrative of women's participation, but it is a start: engendering research begins with locating the "invisible" women, and reclaiming their "activities, experience, and understanding" (Reimann, 2001, 22).

Engendered histories also illuminate "the influence of historical processes on the lives of women and a more critical evaluation of the influence of historical contexts on the ideological production of notions about women" (Shepherd et al., 1995, xi). To understand the diachronic construction of gender relations in a given society is to be able to analyze critically the processes and frameworks that determine dominance and marginalization in that society. Such an understanding is especially essential in conflict-habituated societies so that the cycle of violence informing inter-community relations can be broken. The post-independence peasant movement in Assam was a transitional period in redefining masculinity in Assam, a time when different forms of hypermasculinist violence were filtering into diverse segments of the society. To illustrate, in the early years after independence, the state police forces were often overpowered by rural women who "assaulted" them when they came to repress the peasants at the behest of the state and landlords (A. Saikia, 2014, 263). The landlords were known to rape and murder women (A. Mahanta, 1998, 45) but the state forces were yet to be brutalized to the extent that they used women's bodies as sites of repression. In the years following, as the periphery's association with the mainland deepened, a predilection toward violence insidiously wove itself into the social and cultural fabric of the region. This culture of violence legitimized structural and direct violence. In conflict-habituated societies, such direct violence is aimed at the victims of structural violence who react against it, violently or not (Graf et al., 2007, 131). When the Bodo community rose in protest against their marginalization in Assam, they were repressed just as brutally by the Government of Assam as the Assam Andolan was suppressed by the Government of India. In 1988, just eight years after the Indian army raped 17 women in North Kamrup, Assam police personnel gang raped 11 Bodo women in Bhumka, Kokrajhar (High Court of Assam, 1988).

Various women's organizations cutting across class, caste, and ethnicity came together to demand action against the perpetrators in both incidents of violence against women. Huge rallies were held and protests registered. But instead of providing women a platform to mobilize against gendered violence, these protests were co-opted into the wider ethno-nationalist agenda. "The city women who visited the areas of North Kamrup where the rape took place sympathised with the victims opining that rather than they are looked down upon (sic.) they should be given the honour of martyrs as they sacrificed what

was dearer to them than life, their chastity, for their country" (A. Mahanta, 1998, 47). Such public valorization of victims of wartime rape "as symbols of national victimhood and of the barbarity of the enemy" is in sharp contrast to the "moral suspicions often cast upon victims of 'normal, everyday' rape" (Helms, 2013, 198). In the larger contexts defined by warrior masculinity, the victimized ethno-nation can only effectively combine victimhood and heroism in the body of the martyr (Helms, 2013, 233); the raped women become the means of claiming this unique status for the leadership.

The urban middle-class women activists of Assam adopted this rhetoric instead of challenging the patriarchal, militarized structures that make such "martyrdom" necessary in wartime while converting it into a badge of shame for the victim in peacetime. Their approach also indicates the necessity for an intersectional examination of women's movements/activism in militarized societies as informed by the underlying social inequities of class, caste, and ethnic hierarchy. Because of the ubiquity of unequal power relations and the responses to them across changing times and locations, women's movements, globally, have seen many fractures and fault lines threatening the ideals of sisterhood and solidarity. The women's liberation movement in America, for example, saw a "chasm that separated the '60s radicals from those who immediately preceded them." Many "disputatious encounters" separate the first and second wave feminists in the United States (Echols, 1989, 12). On the Indian mainland, questions of women's liberation have involved "paradoxes and contradictions" resulting from the "degree and nature of female subordination" that varies "from class to class, ethnic group to ethnic group, and ... according to the type of society" (Omvedt, 1975, 43).

A similarly "complex pattern of social models and interacting social movements" informs the women's experiences in Assam. Combined with militarization and intractable conflicts, this pattern becomes more intricate and integral to any assessment of women's roles in the ethno-nationalist movements. Thus, divided along the same fissures that also cause ethnic fragmentation and conflict, "when the Bhumka rapes occurred it appeared as if only the Boro (Bodo) people should protest; the non-Bodo people were hesitant to offer any open sympathy to the victims for fear that this would be construed as sympathy for the Boro (Bodo) cause" (A. Mahanta, 1998, 47).

In sharp contrast, during the anti-colonial and peasant movements, Chandraprabha Saikiani – herself an Axamiyā-Hindu – actively worked toward building bridges between the women of all communities of Assam. In her Keynote Address of the First Convention of the Assam Kachari Mahila Sanmilani (Assam Tribal Women's Association) she identified certain practices among the indigenous communities that were cited as reasons for their exclusion from the "mainstream" Hindu universe: these include drinking alcohol and eating pork and chicken, because of which the Axamiyā-Hindus treated them with disdain. For the most part, indigenous people were considered "unclean" and not allowed into Hindu households. Even when they were, they had separate utensils earmarked for them and were forced to wash these

after eating (field interviews). Taking such widespread prejudices head on, Saikiani urged the Kachari women to not internalize the idea that food can make people “big or small” and determine social hierarchy: she advocated education for the indigenous communities and claimed, “if you are educated, everybody will be forced to consider you superior” (Saikiani, 1930, 748, my translation). Furthermore, she emphasized, “Rearing chicken and pigs is a profitable business … If we abandon things one by one thinking they are bad, our economic condition will deteriorate … Business and economic improvement make people better” (Saikiani, 1930, 749, my translation). In 1948, she presided over a meeting of indigenous peasants in Beltola, and “spoke against the existing exploitative agrarian relations.” In the meeting attended largely by women, she demanded that the indigenous peasant be protected from the rich peasants (A. Saikia, 2014, 265). Saikiani herself led an unconventional life as an unwed single mother who emphasized women’s freedom of choice both in the personal and the public and political.

Reclaiming these engendered histories and historical figures is important so that later women, who are the products of that history, are inspired to produce engendered histories of their own. But when they are forgotten, hope dies, and with it the possibility of alternate, creative, and flexible futures (Bar-Tal, 2001, 601). It is “the yearning for relief from negative conditions” (Bar-Tal, 2001, 604) that gives rise to hope. Unlike its opposite, fear, – which causes “cognitive freezing” and “prevents openness to new ideas” (*ibid.*) – hope is both affective and cognitive: the goal of “feeling good about the expected pleasant events or outcomes” inspires goal-directed thinking, determination, and planning” (*ibid.*). Revisiting engendered histories can help goal-directed future thinking among women and counter the contemporary conflict-inducing narratives.

In the absence of these documented histories, the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti that Saikiani was instrumental in establishing became a “fossilised shell without the original spirit” in post-independence Assam (P. Banerjee, 2001, 145). Attempts were made during the Andolan to give a cohesive shape to the mahila samitis – that had such a glorious history of activism – by forming local- and state-level co-ordination committees. But they could not sustain without hope and when the Andolan ended, these committees faded away (*ibid.*). Barthakur and Goswami (1990, 228) record this stark hopelessness that visited women after the Andolan ended: “The women who took active part in the movement now regret that they have nothing to look back upon and nothing to look forward to. The future seems bleak … The dream of a better Assam has been shattered.”

## **Women’s Agency**

### ***Isolation***

In this hopeless environment, many women suffered in isolation. Increasingly, they found themselves at the receiving end of violence from the State, the

militants, and a corresponding escalation of domestic violence. As the last chapter detailed, the structural and cultural changes wrought by years of violent conflict created an atmosphere that is permissive of abuse and violence against women. In their individual states of isolation, women today experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental and emotional problems that manifested as a result of violent acts like rape, sexual abuse, and assault. Displacement, trafficking, disinheritance, and disappearance are rampant. Enhanced economic burdens despite loss of social legitimacy, a breakdown of socially sanctioned behavior leading to escalation of human rights abuses, and diseases like HIV/AIDS are other fallouts of the conflict years (S. Hazarika and Gill, 2011).

Meanwhile, the women who would be rebels faced problems of rehabilitation when they surrendered or returned to the “mainstream” after the male leaders signed ceasefire agreements. In the case of ULFA cadres, a man could easily rejoin society as a productive member or “become” a Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam (SULFA) (P. Banerjee, 2001, 150). The SULFA was a loose collective that emerged in the 1990s as “a gigantic organized crime conglomerate that ... abandoned its political intent, and that operates substantially under the protection of, and in collusion with, the state and its agents” (Sahni and Routray, 2001). Former rebel women, however, faced social ostracization; although there was some “adulation for these young ‘nationalists,’” often, their families did not want them to return and live with them (P. Banerjee, 2001, 149–150).

In today’s Assam, then, women exist “in various states of isolation – whether through direct oppression or through deification – as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters – all those states of being which envelop and constrain a woman’s self-realization as a woman and, through the weight of traditional roles and expectations, contain her, making it difficult to emerge out of their shadow or sidestep them” (N. Dutta, 2017, 3). They are also fragmented along ethnic lines preventing them from organizing around feminist ideologies. Stripped of organizational experience and excluded from public policy- and decision-making forums, their capacity for public politics and offices is also diminished. Kept away from anti-war activism, they are unable to generate a collective and conscious feminist agenda.

Several studies reveal how protracted violent conflicts provide women with greater opportunities for political involvement and equality (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002; Chedelin and Eliatamby, 2011; Buvinic et al., 2012). Peace research in conflict societies has also established that the feminism generated in anti-war activism tends to be more evolved and holistic, holding out lessons for anti-war movements and conflict transformation efforts in general (Cockburn, 2010). Have the women of Assam lost all agency then? Is theirs a catatonic existence replicating the overarching hegemonic masculinity that informs the structures and cultures of Assam today? Feminists across the globe recognize sisterhood and solidarity as the bedrock of social change (Pearson, 2007). By replicating the ethnic fragmentations and echoing the polarized rhetoric of

their androcentric societies, are the women of Assam missing out on creating their own communities of change and conflict transformation?

These are some of the questions I started with when planning this book. I saw instances of women in my city, Guwahati, taking the lead in publicly assaulting other women because they were “tribal” and allegedly inebriated (Handique, 2010). I read about witch hunting incidents in rural Assam where women – as much as men – participate in murdering other women (and sometimes, men) who were accused of witchcraft and sorcery: superstitions inform these murderous acts, but sometimes the “witches” are scapegoats in land and property disputes (NEN, 2021). I also recalled the conversations I had with women in the field when I was researching my earlier book on conflict and reconciliation in Assam; they seemed unaware of their complicity in allowing their own marginalization. When the first elections to the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) were underway in 2006, I asked Bodo women why they had not participated in the democratic process and pushed for equal rights in decision-making: they said they had been adequately compensated financially by the male leaders of the newly formed political parties to stay away. The various women’s organizations I interacted with also seemed uncritical of their position as the apolitical, social welfare oriented “women’s arms” of male-dominated ethno-nationalist, political parties. The patriarchal parent organizations used them as force-multipliers and for crucial logistical support when required, but otherwise relegated them to the role of vigilantes and moral police of the community.

### ***Recalibration***

When I started writing this book, though, I was forced to revisit these presumptions about the women’s complicity in self-marginalization and relinquishing their agency. I had to check my own privileged position as a member of the dominant Axamiyā-Hindu community, growing up in an urban environment insulated from the on-ground conflicts for the most part, and subsequently moving to study, work, and live in the mainland. I have discussed in the Introduction how reflecting on my own positionality and biography helped me recalibrate my research questions and view the operations of noiseless agency and invisible power from the perspective of oppressed and marginalized entities.

Such reflexivity revealed to me how marginality too is a site of “radical possibility, a space of resistance,” and it can be “a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse” (hooks, 1989, 149). From there, where the margins are their own center, I revisited my presumptions about women’s interaction – or lack of it – with the mainstream processes of political reconstruction and reconciliation. I found that rather than being a way of escaping brutal social realities, the women’s withdrawal from existing public platforms is, in fact, their way of coping with these realities, and inadvertently changing them. The following section, thus, looks at what the women are doing

away from the public platforms and how these actions are redefining “deeper patterns of relationship” (Lederach, 2014, 13) and restoring the relationships that broke through violent confrontations. It also inquires if these women can help us reframe existing approaches to conflict to focus on its transformational potential and ensure sustainable peace through transcendence.

### ***Transformation and Transcendence***

The women of Assam embody the worst effects that conflicts can have on people. And yet, they are also the ones who, more than any other constituency, have transcended these effects. Transcending conflicts is creating out of a contradiction (or from incompatible goals), “an attractive new reality acceptable to all those involved” (Galtung and Fischer, 2013, 4). The contradictions that were once the basis of social conflict and informed ethnic hierarchies are slowly being transformed by the women of Assam. In the process, they are creating a new lived reality. Sometimes they have done this on their own, at other times, as collectives. In their individual capacities, some are isolated from the community, like the war widows and single mothers; others work in their communities as (for example) professional women and community helpers alongside other individual women, but without formal organization. Many women have also mobilized into collectives and self-help groups.

In introducing disparate studies of the communities of women in Assam, N. Dutta (2017, 10) has pointed out how these communities “may be formed in spite of social processes of isolation.” Labelling these as “negative” communities, she traces how they exist “despite resistances to their formation.” They are by no means “the end product,” but may form the basis of more organized resistance and mobilization, building on the similarity of experience. The widows of conflict constitute one such “negative” community. During the conflict years, many of these widows were ostracized by their own societies for fear of militant backlash or the wrath of the state’s agencies. The government did not compensate them, or if they did eventually, middlemen and bureaucrats siphoned away much of the financial aid. They had to survive, and they did it by whatever means necessary. Sometimes, family and people from the community helped but, in the end, as Bharati Kalita who lost her husband to State-sponsored “secret” killers<sup>2</sup> in 2001 says, it is the woman who has to face the struggle all by herself (W. Hussain, 2006, 55).

Kunti Rani Borah Gogoi’s husband, a businessman and community leader, was shot dead in 2007 on suspicion of being an insurgent by personnel of the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF): this central armed police force was stationed in Geleky of Sivasagar district to guard oil installations and was not involved in counter-insurgency operations (Telegraph Bureau, 2007). Kunti, who had never had to work for a living before and had no clue about her husband’s finances, was left with a four-year-old son and the responsibility of looking after her husband’s family. She faced criticism from the people in her community for accepting the ex-gratia payment made by the government

following her husband's death. But as she said to me: "I was left with nothing and needed to invest financially in the future." In the past 15 years, Kunti has not only survived, but thrived: among the many enterprises she nurtured are a small tea plantation that she owns and a successful school she runs. The school was a dream she shared with Nilikesh and she poured the amount she received from the government into building it up. Today, the Adarsha Bidyapith Secondary School has around 500 students and serves the community by providing affordable quality education (field interviews and observations).

Her success today has eclipsed the personal tragedy she suffered from and the hardships she faced raising a traumatized child while continuing her husband's legacy of community leadership. With no mechanism for addressing their trauma and having no legal redress, the conflict years left many women like Kunti to fend for themselves and their families. Despite this, many of them express the resolve to come together to "do something" for – and with – other women in their situation: this indicates the possibility of future mobilization that can facilitate empowerment as a community. Today, Kunti is at the forefront of organizing the women of Geleky under the banner of the Geleky Birangana Mahila Samiti which is involved in numerous activities, from organizing skill development and self-defense workshops, to encouraging women to tell their stories by publishing their writings, to mobilizing them politically on issues affecting the community. In October 2019, the women of Geleky took to the streets protesting against the poor road conditions in the area; when I visited Kunti in October 2021, the roads were in excellent condition (field interviews and observations).

During the conflict years, though, inhibited by fear and constrained by lack of security and limited mobility, the women had to function mostly in individual capacities. In many parts of the state, they formed groups "to rescue the young men taken away by the army on mere suspicion" (S. Hazarika and Gill, 2011). Though not formalized, these groups could often mobilize "in a matter of hours." In the 1990s, when atrocities by the State's armed forces had peaked, groups of about 40–50 women would congregate and organize "10 day protests" in different localities. In the days before the Internet and social media, they had the capacity to quickly and efficiently mobilize "housewives, agricultural labourers or students" (P. Banerjee, 2001, 155).

A more visible and publicized instance of mobilization was that of the wives of the "missing" ULFA leaders. These leaders had "disappeared" from their camps in the forests of neighboring Bhutan where they were sheltering. This happened during the 2003 Operation All Clear conducted by the Indian Army in collaboration with the Royal Bhutan Army to flush out the rebels. Till today, no official account has been made available for their disappearance by the Indian State. Demanding answers and looking for closure, their wives resorted to public protests and fasts (Staff Reporter, 2007). Allegations and counter-allegations were made both by the State agencies and the ULFA that this mobilization and its outcome (the women eventually withdrew their

agitation) were manipulated (Kumar, 2007). The women, however, had to return to their lives and their children. As Menoka Chetiah, one of the wives, said: “Those making these accusations were actually hoping we would die and they would launch another agitation over our bodies to further their own political interests” (Staff Reporter, 2007). The women have now returned to noiselessly rebuilding their lives, away from the public platforms managed by the men with power.

Like these women, there are many others who are noiselessly redefining their own lives, alone or as communities, using the State’s resources or not. Loosely formed, these communities instill a sense of sisterhood that goes beyond ethnic considerations. Jonali Barman is an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) in the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) of the Government of India. She cycles<sup>3</sup> 10 miles from her village to Barama town in Baksa district every day to inquire after the well-being of her patients. She cooks for her entire family in the morning and her husband complains about the cold food when he eats his lunch alone. Jonali herself does not even get to have lunch sometimes, but she is not yet ready to give up on her hard-earned job. She encourages the young women of her village to earn their own living, finding them employment as domestic help, shopkeepers’ assistants, and so on. She does not help these other women on the basis of their ethnic identities, but because they need help: “They come to me for help, I do what I can,” she says (field interviews and observations).

Rahima Begum of Udaguri district is employed as an Anganwadi Worker (AWW) in the government’s Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). The AWW is paid a monthly stipend to run the community play center “where women/mother’s groups can come together” (NIPCCD, 2006). Every morning, she leaves her husband in charge of their house and three children to go to the local Anganwadi center. The money she brings home complements her husband’s earnings from their small piece of land, and together they can send their children to private schools. Her eldest daughter is studying to be a nurse. Through her agency, Rahima is challenging the “frame of difference” that relegates people from her Muslim community to the category of poor and illiterate, requiring government intervention in family planning for the “welfare of the minority community” (Pakrasi, 2021). At the same time, like Jonali, she is also challenging the traditional family structure and gendered norms of her community, where the woman is the primary caregiver of children while the husband goes out to earn a living.

Many women in Assam are, in fact, capitalizing on society’s gendered expectations and inverting them to make a career and a living for themselves. Like Rahima who works at a center for “convergence of services for children and women” (NIPCCD, 2006). Or like Jonali, who represents her community and is a caregiver and nurturer in her capacity as a community-based health activist “selected from the village itself and accountable to it [and] trained to work as an interface between the community and the public health system” (National Health Mission, 2022). Like their sisters in neighboring Manipur

and Nagaland (P. Banerjee, 2000, 141), they are also confining themselves to the traditional venues carved for them (like childcare centers) and refraining from challenging traditional gender roles (of caregivers, wives, and mothers). Through their apparent compliance, they are noiselessly transforming gendered spaces and changing gender-based narratives.

Collectively and individually, another significant category of women is using and monetizing the traditional role assigned to them. These are the weavers of Assam, who were romanticized by Mahatma Gandhi as translating “their dreams into weaving” (Deka, 2013, 170), and for whom weaving on the household loom was traditionally part of their daily chores: part of their responsibility toward the family was to weave clothes for everyday use (Deka, 2013, 121). Many women in urban, semi-urban, and rural centers are now organizing across ethnic boundaries to form self-help groups (SHGs) to successfully create national and international markets for their woven products. Srishti Handlooms and co-operative silk cultivation, led by former ULFA insurgent and writer, Kaberi Kachari Rajkhowa, brings together weavers who are former insurgents or wives and widows of former insurgents trying to readjust to “mainstream” society (field interviews). They supply to international buyers like the Fabric Social from Australia (McAlpine, 2017).

Weavers from different ethnic communities are weaving motifs of their neighboring communities into their traditional designs, something that was considered taboo since these motifs often represent the narratives of their ancestors and their origins. But with the growing commercial demand for freshness and variety, the women are experimenting with fusing these narratives together, often in the process, weaving a stronger fabric of ethnic harmony (field interviews). They are changing the narratives of competition and contradiction between the communities of Assam. By focusing on themselves as individual women or as interdependent women of self-sustaining communities, they are adjusting their own agency. Noiselessly, from the bottom up, they are overturning gender norms, but not militantly. They are using available resources and improvising, leveraging their resilience and innovativeness. Sidestepping confrontation, they are concentrating on enhancement. In the process, they are reconciling relationships and laying the foundation of peace for the future.

At the same time, they are also ensuring economic empowerment for themselves, their families, and communities at large. A study conducted in two districts of Bodoland – Baksa and Udalguri – showed how microfinance SHG programs have been successful in alleviating poverty there. SHG households show “a positive and statistically significant impact on the monthly income, employment days, and financial inclusion level of participants of the programme.” They also demonstrate “a higher level of financial inclusion as compared to non-participants” (Maity and Sarania, 2017). Women’s SHGs across Assam are rearing pigs, goats, poultry, and cattle to cater to the meat and dairy industries. Other industries the women are contributing to include bamboo and jute handicrafts, dried fish making, and silkworm rearing.

Violent conflicts are usually sustained because they are lucrative for everybody involved, from the armed forces to insurgent armies to the State machinery alike. In analyzing the main stakeholders of a war economy, Ballentine and Nitzschke (2005, 17–18) point out how the combat and shadow (or black market) economies are dominated by a wide range of actors. These include “the security apparatus of the state (military, para-military groups, police) and rebel groups, as well as domestic and foreign “conflict entrepreneurs,” who supply the necessary weapons and military material” as well as “profiteers, transport sector, businessmen, drug traffickers, ‘downstream’ actors (truck drivers, poppy farmers).” The Northeast serves as a conduit for drugs produced in the infamous Golden Triangle, on the western corner of which the region is situated. When the rebels from the region required sanctuary and funds, they took to protecting the drug lords in the Triangle, raising concerns beyond insurgency and separatism (Bhaumik, 2005). On the other hand, India’s security personnel have also engaged in the drug trade (NET Web Desk, 2021). Certainly, the security apparatus posted in the Northeast has come under considerable scrutiny for its involvement in numerous instances of corruption and scams (Pandey, 2021; Outlook Web Bureau, 2019). It is understandable, therefore, that neither of the armed parties – State and non-State – would want an end to the violent conflicts.

Through their peace entrepreneurship, the women of Assam are proving that conflict transformation and ethnic reconciliation are also rewarding. Individually and as communities, they are showing the way toward creating a new economic reality. They are challenging popular attitudes to accommodate ethnic reconciliation and gender equality; what is more, they have made such accommodation economically viable. Achieved without “intervention, external agency or a powerful discursive framework” the empowerment thus acquired by the women of Assam is distinctive. It is certainly different from that which is the goal of the women’s movement on the Indian mainland, a movement that is “mostly an elite grouping that is isolationist in its own way” (N. Dutta 2017, 6). The nature of ethnic reconciliation effected in the path to such empowerment, therefore, is also stronger and built on a more durable foundation. “Relationships,” according to Lederach (2014, 19), “are the heart of transformational processes.” The organic peace that comes from such reconciliation and transformation of relationships has the potential to endure.

In Assam’s fractured and fragmented society, however, to expect an “autonomous” feminist movement<sup>4</sup> to arise out of these developments on the ground would be far-fetched. These women – mostly in rural and semi-urban Assam – are empowering themselves and self-organizing in response to the post-insurgency social and economic realities. There is no conscious agenda, no proclamations, no self-consciousness even. They are empowering the individual woman, giving her the wherewithal to either subvert or circumvent gendered expectations, and perhaps through such empowerment, holding out hope of building stronger women’s collectives and movements in the future. At the moment, though, the communities of women in post-insurgency Assam

are amorphous at best, and most certainly fragile. In the here and now, their usefulness lies in that they hold the key to conflict transformation and transcendence in Assam.

But given the mainstream culture of hegemonic masculinity fueled by hypermasculinist violence, such developments remain haunted by “the spectre of isolation that is the site from which these women emerge.” Given the greater organized power and stronger agency in the mainstream, masculinist enterprises, for these women there is always “the potential of reverting to the state of isolation” (N. Dutta 2017, 6). However, it is this fusing together of strength and fragility, this determination despite the danger of disintegration in the communities they form that holds relevance for all marginalized entities everywhere who are struggling to overcome their lot.

## **Women and the Margins**

Within their marginalized spaces, then, the women of Assam are noiselessly, and without confrontation, successfully challenging dichotomies that are necessarily gendered and, as such, inform direct, cultural, and structural violences (Confortini, 2006, 333). Besides challenging established gender roles and expectations, they are also problematizing the dichotomy between conflict and post-conflict reconstruction, which pits conflict (as an aberrant condition of human existence) against “peace” (a post-conflict situation when the last shot has been fired and the last corpse laid to rest). Their agency in post-insurgency Assam illustrates how peace work can begin even before the idealized condition of post-conflict stasis has been achieved. In this, they resonate the growing understanding in conflict analysis that conflict and peace do not occur in a “linear and phase-based manner” and that post-conflict is only a category devised in scholarship and practice for the purposes of institutionalized peacebuilding, facilitation of third-party intervention, and/or heuristic purposes in academia (Lederach and Lederach, 2010, 48).

Especially in societies experiencing protracted conflicts, dichotomizing peace and conflict – or even conflict and post-conflict – is particularly problematic. The experience of marginalized communities in such societies illustrates that violence has “resilient patterns” and as a “social phenomenon has a capacity to regenerate, bounce back and take new forms that replicate old patterns” (Lederach and Lederach, 2010, 50). Thus, women in conflict-habituated societies bear the burden of “continuums of violence [that] exist in times of peace, in times of war, within families, and within state institutions” (Yadav and Horn, 2021, 105). And although – or perhaps, because – they are caught in the repetitiousness and circularity of their everyday experiences of violence, they instinctively act in wartime and peace “as contributive and positive components of change, rather than as negative components that are stagnating, reactive or detrimental” (Lederach and Lederach, 2010, 9).

Acknowledging the changes that they are effecting would call for a reframing of the existing conflict narrative. Policymakers, peace negotiators,

and researchers need to help reorient extant approaches to conflict that only highlight its negative, destructive impacts. The transformative opportunities that conflict affords should be made part of the political and public discourse, from which it is now absent. The need now is to ensure that these transformations begin reflecting in meaningful policy changes – like building the entrepreneurial capacities of women weavers or providing new markets for SHG products. Existing development-oriented policies are refracted through the State's approach to conflict management; the imperative now is to reframe these policies by aiming at ethnic reconciliation and community-based peacemaking. When policymakers and stakeholders revisit the conflict narrative in tandem, and both emphasize peacebuilding, durable solutions will emerge. To this end, the transformations already taking place should be analyzed so that what is gained is preserved and promoted, and further advancement are made in those directions. Instead of concentrating on what was lost due to violence, communities must highlight what has been gained in terms of ethnic reconciliation and cultural and structural transformations.

The need for an engendered approach to peacemaking must be highlighted. The women of Assam, working with each other and from within, can reveal the possibilities and pathways to sustainable change more effectively than when propped up by men, or when they are forced to be excessively reliant on the masculinist State machinery or any of the other numerous androcentric and masculinist entities that work with, for, or against it. The women are flouting existing gender norms while transcending and redefining gendered binaries. In quietly taking away the power of disempowering from those at the top of the hierarchy of power, they are reclaiming agency, but not clamantly. Placing women and giving space to all the marginalized constituencies in processes of peacemaking, therefore, is an essential prerequisite of positive peace, which is achieved through mutual “cooperation and harmony” (Galtung and Fischer, 2013, 139). Since peace constituencies – individuals or groups within conflict-affected societies – work together (Paffenholz and Hoffman, 2002), such positive peace is organic and sustained.

In noiselessly claiming agency, the women of Assam also provide a sharp contrast to the political processes of reconstruction and reconciliation currently underway in Assam. These processes are characterized by constant appeals to the authority of a State whose apathetic and myopic policies instigated the conflicts in the first place. Most militant groups of Assam, for example, are currently enervated after decades of inaction following ceasefire and Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreements signed with the government. They have no alternative but to wait for successive governments to invite them for political negotiations where they can seek “constitutional, legislative, and administrative safeguards of identity, culture, and heritage of the people of Assam” (Chetia, 2021, 29). As they bide their time, they realize that resisting “a power like India” is a tough proposition, whether through armed struggle or diplomatically (Chetia, 2021, 29). Meanwhile, the women do not

look outward for validation; they have left behind the discourse of power and patronage. By claiming their own agency noiselessly, they have moved away from the public dispensation toward power politics. They do not make proclamations of subversion, they merely circumvent. And although none of this may ever translate into large feminist formations or movements for women's emancipation, they do hold out lessons for conflict transformation and transcendence in Assam.

The men who are in control of post-accord and post-insurgency public politics in the Northeast periphery, need to derive inspiration from these women in order to address the region's long-running conflicts. They should revisit their grievances against the Indian mainland and the strategies they devised to address these grievances. Years of armed conflict and militant violence have not helped any of the insurgent groups of Assam achieve their stated objectives: the Bodo or the Dimasa did not get a separate state, and neither did the ULFA or the NDFB attain sovereignty. A fresh look at the ethno-nationalist goals also, therefore, might be called for. It is true that the national conventions of many of the communities of Assam are regrouping and rethinking their approach, but undue reliance on external patronage might leave them open to further manipulation.

Admittedly, these quiet changes would not have been possible if these women were in the political or public limelight, and it is the condition of marginality alone that affords such opportunities. The marginalized people of Assam (and the Northeast), therefore, need to recall their histories of marginalization and position themselves with, rather than over, the other marginalized constituencies of the periphery. They must locate themselves in their shared marginality and speak from that location: "understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonised people" (hooks, 1989, 21). Without such acceptance and alignment, resistance is impossible. And without such resistance from within, change is impossible.

For change to endure and become organically entrenched in society, it must come from within the society and be "effected by the disadvantaged and oppressed themselves" (Ong, 2016, 66). The marginalized and disadvantaged alone have lived experience of being framed as different "in ways that impose significant constraints on how they experience their lives" (Ong, 2016, 62). Every individual thus framed must, therefore, work toward recasting the oppressive frames of difference to bring about personal transformation, as the women are doing. Conflict scholars also agree that behavioral change leads to changes in attitudes and beliefs that, ultimately, aid structural change and transformation (Mitchell, 2006, 29). Since their transformation is occurring in society, and in the "the communities of people who are also disadvantaged and oppressed," such transformation has the potential to change that society, organically (Ong, 2016, 63). The same cannot be said of social change that is "engineered by political actors and knowledge experts" (Ong, 2016, 66).

## Notes

- 1 The Bodo and Dimasa communities were earlier included under the common label of Kacharis. In the 1980s, they renounced the Kachari appellation which had taken on derogatory connotations.
- 2 The secret killings of Assam were a spate of extra-legal killings that characterized the Indian State's covert anti-insurgency operations in Assam in the 1990s and 2000s. Family members of insurgents were tortured and murdered by unknown assailants (M. Talukdar et al., 2008).
- 3 The relation between women's emancipation and bicycles is an old one. It was first noted in nineteenth-century America when *The Courier* (Nebraska) commented in 1895 on "some new woman, mounted on her steed of steel," and Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared that "woman is riding to suffrage on the bicycle" (Lafrance, 2014).
- 4 The current (and third) phase of the Indian feminist movement has been self-characterized as "autonomous," signifying that it is independent from other public groupings in the social and political arena and from nationalist and reformist politics (Ram, 2000).

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# Postscript

## Peace Praxis and Reflexivity

### Introduction

This book began with the goal of engendering the post-independence conflictual association of Assam – and India’s Northeast periphery as a whole – with the mainland. Its aim was to reconstruct a gendered analysis of Assam’s ethno-nationalist conflicts that are the consequence of this long association, while reclaiming the role of women and other marginalized constituencies in this history. To that end, Chapter 1 introduced this Northeast Indian state as a specific location for studying operations of gendered power in global, multi-ethnic geopolitical peripheries. The conflict-habituated society of Assam demonstrates how marginalized – and often dehumanized – constituencies with varying levels of patriarchal control engage with and negotiate their marginality (and relative centrality) within a complex and intricate matrix of power and positionality that is always moving and shifting. Chapter 2 explored this relational marginality by studying the men in the margins and the mutating notions of masculinity that determined their participation in (and contribution to) protracted conflicts. Chapter 3 subsequently unraveled how these mutations bred an interlaced environment of militarization, hypermasculinization, and gendered violence. Additionally, it extended the analysis of these interconnections to examining victimhood and agency among some of the most vulnerable marginalized constituencies – namely, women and migrants.

By centering the marginalized in their inquiry, Chapters 3 and 4 identified the obstacles to achieving positive peace, which is the kind of peace that is characteristically based on cooperation and mutual healing. Chapter 4, particularly, entered the marginalized spaces occupied by Assam’s women who are invisible from the masculinized public and political platforms and are subjected to many violences, public and interpersonal. The chapter found that these women are creating a new reality and making positive peace through powerful, yet, non-confrontational ways that also redefine gendered relationships. The chapter advocated for documenting and disseminating these engendered histories the women are making. Engendered histories challenge the androcentrism inherent in historical discourse and

try to reconstruct historical knowledge from a multiplicity of perspectives. Feminist historians have attempted not merely to write parallel histories of women but also questioned the “methodological assumptions and the modernist notions in which history was regarded as universal, with no attention to the differences between the historical experiences and realities of men and women” (Shepherd et al., 1995, xi–xii).

This book calls for writing engendered histories of not just the women, but of all marginalized constituencies in peripheries of power. This is because such histories empower the marginalized in the knowledge that they were produced by others like them. They also hold up the promise of a counter-hegemonic feminist future that is informed by the experiences of the marginalized. “Often,” bell hooks (1989, 16) says, “when the radical voice speaks about domination we are speaking to those who dominate.” Engendered histories, however, speak to the marginalized themselves by centering their experiences. Consequently, these histories are able to motivate the marginalized to move beyond victimhood to agency and inspire them to dismantle the traditional histories narrated by those who wield power with the goal to continue perpetuating their power. The victims of these traditional histories are many; engendering history propels those who have been victimized by them to participate in new histories-in-the-making, which they can now initiate and inscribe. Thus, there is also resistance against those who dominate.

Chapters 3 and 4 revealed how the condition of victimhood is induced through fear that is weaponized by those at the centers of power to inspire the allied emotions of hatred, contempt, and aggression. These feed into an endless cycle of violence that makes conflict a habit, a way of life. These chapters also emphasized the need to put these narratives of fear and victimhood in perspective, especially when they are used as tools to fragment societies and perpetuate violence. The project of engendering history and writing a feminist future must begin by reflecting on the technology and architecture of these narratives to be able to resist them. In conclusion, therefore, this book argues for the use of reflexivity as a tool of resistance. Reflexivity is used in critical feminism to resist the subjugation of diverse knowledge systems and their producers (Rose, 1997); in this postscript, I extend the argument I made throughout the book that such reflexivity must be put into practice in conflict-habituated societies in order to dismantle political strategies of domination and violent subjugation. Reflexivity as theory must guide the political self-reflection of entire communities in conflict to bring together everyday practice and policy. This alone can ensure organic peace, which makes peace – instead of conflict – a habit and a way of life.

For peace to be organic and sustained, it must be reclaimed from within, by critically reflecting on the inherent connections between engendered pasts and feminist futures, between local changes and global contexts, and by relating small everyday incremental changes to big shifts impacting entire societies, nations, and global orders. Critical feminist scholarship has helped us identify these connections; Enloe (2014, 11–12), for example, identifies how women’s

resistance “can realign both local and international systems of power,” which is why every national movement for suffrage has raised the “political alarm” as much as every personal demand “by women married to soldiers and diplomats to pursue their own careers.” In connecting the specific conflicts of Assam – and Northeast India – to marginalization in and conflict-habituation of global multicultural societies, this final chapter additionally argues for the need to identify and instrumentalize such organic connections toward breaking endemic cycles of violence and establishing engendered peace. In this, it serves more as a postscript than a conclusion.

The nature of, and requirements for, this peace – like the condition of marginality itself – will necessarily shift and change as it responds to existing power structures that are also constantly mutating through interaction within a complex matrix of interrelationships. Amidst this flux, stakeholders must be willing to continually reflect on the ways in which they are making peace and on how this peace is impacting real lives. At the same time, stakeholders must remember that they are themselves being reshaped by the structures of power that they are invested in reshaping. The success of the project for organic peace, therefore, depends on interrogation and an unceasing questioning of the self in relation to these changing power relations. This is a radical departure from existing peacemaking enterprises that consider conflict and peacemaking, disempowerment and empowerment, marginality and centrality as separate and sequential. In this book’s conception, they are continuums, and are contained in each other. The way to fully understand and appreciate this continuum is to be in the margins while reflecting on one’s situatedness there. This location brings with it the ability to “see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds,” which is central to “the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives” (hooks, 1989, 20).

## Reflection

Reflexivity as a methodology has been used in feminist research to unearth subjugated knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2007, 3). Feminist peace research also uses it to critique “conventional approaches in peace studies, especially when they have silenced and/or subjugated topics, methods, and theories” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, 2). Feminist peace scholars are committed to “shedding light on all types of biases, including colonial, regional, or gender biases that have contributed to the veiling and erasures” (*ibid.*). Their process of knowledge seeking is committed to including marginalized epistemologies “whether those margins are women or other (gendered) people, ideas, or other sentient beings” (*ibid.*). This process is simultaneously inward-looking and aware that the researcher herself is present in the knowledge-making and “might contribute to harm, violence, and/or oppressive relations” (*ibid.*). Questions about power differentials often go unasked in traditional research methods; feminist inquiry, however, places such questions at the center of research and

knowledge production in order to avoid subjugating “other knowledge and their producers” (Rose, 1997, 307). Since feminist scholarship is itself a form of resistance, it has to constantly be aware of the danger of replicating “the false neutrality and universality of so much academic knowledge” (Rose, 1997, 306).

Being a political act, therefore, every feminist research program begins by reflecting on the researcher’s positionality and situatedness. After all, the knowledge claims made by research and scholarship are also “inevitably political.” Additionally, they have “real consequences for the ways in which we understand and organize our lives” (Lafrance and Wigginton, 2019, 5) and the lives of those impacted by our research. As a means of relating agency to action and developing the intimate relationship between thinking and acting (Crouch and Pearce, 2012, 33), reflection and reflexivity are, thus, central to practice and praxis. Therefore, in exercising their agency and designing peaceful futures for themselves, marginalized communities in conflict situations must also practice reflection. They must develop their own praxis of how researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and community actors interact with “new material conditions and ways of thinking” (Crouch and Pearce, 2012, 33). This interaction will determine the nature of the social structures that shape and are shaped by their agency and action. Constant reflection for self-validation and course correction is essential to building an engendered, peaceful future.

In July 2019, 34 years after the signing of the Assam Accord (1985) which ended the Assam Andolan, the Government of India constituted a High Level Committee (HLC) to make recommendations on the implementation of Clause 6 of the Accord that had promised “constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards” for the protection, preservation, and promotion of “the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people” (Government of Assam, 2021). Being mindful of the “large scale ramifications of their mandate on the future of the State of Assam,” the HLC invited representations and received over 1,200 statements. They also scheduled 16 days of personal hearings and stakeholder consultations and “interacted with the representatives of various communities and individuals from a cross-section of the society” (High Level Committee on Clause 6 of Assam Accord, 2021). Taking into consideration these statements and consultations, they prepared their report and submitted it in February 2020. A close perusal of the representations made by civil society leaders of Assam to the HLC “demonstrate the transformations in the social and political landscape of Assam affected by the intractable conflicts. They also show that the communities are ready for dialogue and self-reflection” (A. Dutta, 2021, viii).

Out of the empirical evidence gathered in the process of collating the HLC’s report, *Making Peace Mutually: Perspectives from Assam* (Goswami and Dutta, 2021), a collection of essays and conversations was conceived. I was called upon to lead the project that was published and made available locally for the concerned communities. It invited practitioners and scholars,

insurgents and administrators, social changemakers and thought leaders – who were either agents of and/or witnesses to the conflict years – to take part in a dialogue “decoding our histories and building peace with the involvement of the communities in conflict” (A. Dutta, 2021, viii). Unequivocally and unanimously, these voices in the volume emphasized “inclusion, dialogue, self-reflexivity, and community engagement” (A. Dutta and Atreya, 2021, 235). Arguably, then, Assam’s society is ready to move out of violence and into a more inclusive peace.

Some self-reflection is also evident in how the ethno-nationalist organizations are revisiting and sometimes redefining their goals and ethnic aspirations. The Bodo National Convention (BNC) formed in 2010 brought together diverse organizations within the community to continue its struggle for a separate state within the Indian Union despite the fact that certain factions of the community settled for an autonomous council in 2003. In 2011, the BNC convinced the leader of a recalcitrant faction of the independentist National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) to declare “an indefinite cessation of hostilities to find a durable and sustainable political solution to the conflict through political dialogue and discussion” (CDPS, 2020). The upshot was that the various segments of the internally – and violently – fragmented Bodo community could all come together to sign the third Bodo accord in 2020 which promises to endure: the experience in the Northeast has been that piecemeal agreements that excluded certain segments of the communities in conflict have quickly disintegrated. Mizoram is the only state where signing an accord did not lead to further discord: “The Mizo accord has worked because Delhi came to a settlement with the entire Mizo insurgent leadership, not with a splinter group” (Bhaumik, 2009, 105).

For such self-reflection to bring about meaningful change, however, it must be self-validating rather than outward looking and patronage-seeking. Like the women discussed in Chapter 4, marginalized communities must find the seeds of change within themselves. During a two-day Jatiya Mahasabha (National Conclave) that met in March 2007 to discuss prospects of peace and chart new ethno-nationalist goals, the chairperson of the Dima Halom Daogah (DHD), an insurgent group that signed a ceasefire agreement in 2003, urged the Government of India to hold talks with the ULFA and act as a “guardian and big brother” (*The Hindu*, 2007). The current peace processes underway in Assam are all characterized by similar appeals to the authority of a State whose apathetic and myopic policies had instigated the conflicts in the first place. In the end, therefore, they all simply reinstate the same hierarchies of power with a few minor adjustments.

Self-validation, in social psychology, is a metacognitive confidence in one’s own thoughts that can persuade people to change attitudes when accompanied by the requisite extent and content of thinking (Petty et al., 2002). Conflict and peace studies scholars, meanwhile, remind us that for conflict transformation, there is no alternative to changing attitudes and violent behaviors (Galtung and Fischer, 2013, 60): attitudes constitute one end of

the ABC triangle of conflict: “attitudes (‘enemy images’ and ‘friend images’), behaviour (violent or nonviolent, verbal or physical) and contradictions (incompatible goals)” (Galtung and Fischer, 2013, 13). Dialectical Behavior Therapists also use validation as a treatment strategy along with reciprocal communication and environmental intervention for client change. Validation “communicates to the client that her responses make sense and are understandable within her current life context or situation” (Linehan, 1993, 222–223). Subsequently, non-pejorative acceptance as strategy is balanced with dialectical and problem-solving strategies: dialectical because the necessity of acceptance and validation is within a context of helping them change (Linehan, 1997, 354–355).

Similarly, in conflict-habituated societies, communities living amidst violent tensions where emotions run high, must confront the reality of their brutalized context. As they validate and metacognitively recognize their responses to the prevailing climate of hatred and fear, corresponding change strategies can be identified and implemented. When thinking sections of the dominant Axamiyā-speaking community condemn current incidents of state-sponsored violence against the marginalized migrant community and reflect on the rising xenophobia in society, they must be able to connect the contemporary political forces that are polarizing – nay, brutalizing – society to the long history of conflict between the periphery and the mainland. Chapters 2 and 3 discussed how this history reveals that the mainland’s aggressive machismo toward its citizens in the geopolitical periphery led to a gradual strengthening of patriarchal structures here, inspiring the proliferation of hypermasculinist violence. Such a metacognitive reclamation of the history of violence will allow the dominant community to confront their own historical complicity in marginalizing the migrants (among other constituencies of the periphery). At the same time, it will enable them to empathize with the other marginalized entities who are victims of the same history.

Validation, indeed, also involves empathy (Linehan, 1997, 359). Empathy is “perceiving the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person but without ever losing the as if condition” (Rogers, 1980, 141 cited in Linehan, 1997, 359). Developing empathy for similarly victimized communities will encourage communities in conflict to observe themselves critically and determine if their behavior is “valid in terms of one set of antecedents (e.g., historical events) but not in terms of another set (e.g., present events)” (Linehan, 1997, 359). For instance, empathizing with the migrant communities that were uprooted violently by colonial history can help the autochthonous and indigenous communities of Assam change their historically inimical behavior toward them. Colonial and postcolonial violence has victimized all communities of the periphery. Having shared this history with the migrant communities that are contributing equally (in some cases more) to the economy, culture, and society of Assam, it is time to readjust behavioral patterns toward them.

In the case of the Muslims of East Bengali origin, the people of Assam should stop demanding their deportation to a country of origin that no longer exists. Instead, they should acknowledge the immense contributions this community has made toward (among others) sustaining the agricultural economy and enriching the language. This will then open up space for the communities to collectively and critically examine the lack of workable systems guided by humane policies and laws that uphold the dignity, equity, and basic human rights for all, irrespective of origin, ethnicity, and citizenship status. Only by demanding equitable land laws, a fair immigration system, and effective disaster management systems and rehabilitation policies can the people of Assam move toward peace.

Metacognition and reflection are, thus, required in conflict-habituated societies so that they can examine and change their habitual violent responses and behaviors. It is also essential to identify the structures and systems that keep these societies confined to predictable response patterns. By confining and limiting them in this way, these systems also inhibit their ability to move out of the interminable cycle of violence. The communities in Assam must be able and willing to critically reexamine existing power relations and dismantle the hierarchies that have historically induced conflictual attitudes and behaviors.

## **Connection**

Reflection and metacognition will thus help identify the inherent associations between conflict and violence, power and patriarchy, hegemony, and complicity. Unearthing this link will simultaneously reveal the organic continuities between an engendered past, the present condition of endemic violence, and future peace. The pathways to change and peacebuilding exist in these continuums of history if we can reflexively analyze it as history unfolds. As it unfolds, it exposes to the critical examiner the intricate interconnections between local and global needs for peace and positive change at every level of human existence, personal and collective, local and national. This section focuses on these connections.

### ***Past, Present, Future***

This entire book has been an argument for reimagining, from an engendered perspective, the violent histories of multi-ethnic societies at the peripheries of power so that the marginalized peoples of these troubled peripheries can imagine a different future and move toward it in peace. Most societies that have experienced intractable conflicts, however, get caught in what has been described as a dynamic stability: a sort of plateau in inter-community relationships, which traps them “in a repetitive pattern of interaction – usually involving the exchange of violent or coercive behaviours – that seems dynamic, yet stable” (Mitchell, 2006, 15). Dynamic, because there is action and reaction, but stable because it is a sequence “in which today’s conflict

behaviour by one side is a response to yesterday's by the adversary"; meanwhile, the conflict itself "becomes less a matter of the original and underlying goal incompatibility" (ibid.). This pattern of interaction needs to break, and history redirected. Often, in societies where *longue durée* histories were fractured by colonial and postcolonial violences, looking critically at these organic pasts can hold the key to breaking out of the dynamic yet stable cycle of violence.

For instance, revisiting the histories of indigenous peoples in Assam can, in some cases, help understand the conditions of peaceful coexistence and avoidance of war. The scholarship of indigenous scholar, D. Teron (2021, 151) aims to dismantle the colonial construction of the Karbi community he belongs to as "unwarlike" and, hence, "timid," by reframing it as the history of a society "which value(d) peace or internalised peaceful traditions in their social structures." The postcolonial Indian imagination, in conflict with its peripheral peoples, also ascribes violence as the "natural propensity" of its indigenous populations (Kolås, 2017a, 22). Teron (2021), therefore, calls for reintroducing a peace narrative into our public and scholarly discourses where avoidance of war is not equated with timidity, and which move beyond the dichotomies of peace and war, violence and non-violence: the effort should be toward understanding the conditions of war and peace as "survival strategies" historically adopted by communities like the Karbis.

Karbi history and folklore suggest that the community often "paid a heavy price for retreating for survival and refusing to retaliate" (Teron, 2021, 152). But they persisted because they believed the spirits of their "hidden village," Rongbin, would protect them and lead them one day to a "perpetual state of peace and plenty" (ibid.). Subjected to hypermasculinist violence and protracted conflicts, the quiet confidence that Assam's indigenous communities once had in their respective *weltanschauung* has eroded over time. Reclaiming it can help them reimagine a future that reestablishes their relationship with a less violent past.

For the migrant communities, however, history is an irrevocably fractured narrative. The Adivasi communities of Assam, for example, were violently uprooted from their places of origin on mainland India to meet the demands of the European tea industry that developed in colonial Assam. Even today, they continue to be subjected to dehumanization in many ways: from being economically and sexually exploited to being socially "othered" and denigrated. Additionally, the nomenclature "Tea Community" is commonly used as an umbrella term to reduce the diverse Adivasi communities to the commodity that caused their historical displacement. Some members of the community, however, are voicing the people's concerns, frequently in politics but, more powerfully, through poetry and literature. In the process, they are claiming space in the mainstream Axamiyā society; having been forced to relinquish their original indigenous languages, particularly in public forums, they are using the dominant language to speak up. Today, some of the most prominent Axamiyā poets – Sananta Tanti, Samir Tanti, Kamal Kumar Tanti, among

others – belong to the Adivasi communities of Assam. “Language,” as hooks (1989, 16) affirms, “is a place of struggle.” It is a necessary form of resistance for migrant communities, especially, to appropriate the oppressor’s language in order to “recover …, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew” (*ibid.*).

During the Assam Andolan in 1983, at a place called Nellie, about 68 kilometers outside of Assam’s capital city, Guwahati, thousands of immigrant Muslims were killed in a horrific incident of ethnic cleansing, where estimates of the body count vary from 1,200 (M. Hussain, 2008, 261) to 3,300 (Rehman, 2006). After the incident, the community resisted with positive assertion: the headstones of those who died in the pogrom were inscribed in the Axamiyā language. Thus, a section of the community continues to assert itself in the language of the dominant community, which they have embraced and enriched. The recent years have also witnessed a process of rediscovery of self-identity among the community, one I first noted during my research among them in 2004–2006 (U. Goswami, 2011, 31). While they continue to assert their belongingness in Assam, there is a growing confidence among the people in simultaneously asserting their “Miyā” identity. “Miyā” had become a pejorative way of addressing the community, but some writers from the community are reclaiming the label and redefining themselves as Miyā poets while writing stark, provocative poetry in their East Bengali language; the script they use is Axamiyā.

This is “radical cultural practice” (hooks, 1989, 19) emanating from the lived experience of marginality. The indigenous and autochthonous communities of Assam who have been variously marginalized by history must be inspired by such resistance, not resist it or try to silence it. In the early twentieth century, when the Axamiyā national consciousness was being shaped in response to British subjugation, the leaders of the community defined its boundaries but also allowed conditional membership to collectives irrespective of “religion or community, caste or creed.” They announced that “whoever accepts Axamiyā as their mother tongue, whoever does not maintain a permanent establishment elsewhere in any way while considering himself a temporary guest here in Assam; whose economic interest will be primarily in Assam, we will accept him as Axamiyā” (Phukan, 1935 quoted in Bhagabati, 1998, 57, my translation). Although gatekept exclusively by the dominant Axamiyā-speaking community, the basic premise was one of inclusion, not exclusion. In a region where traditional practices of boundary crossing and ethnic passing exist (see Chapter 1) and where identities have been historically negotiated and reconstructed (for example, through detribalization and retribalization), the possibility of imagining new solidarities across ethno-nationalist boundaries should not be discounted. Such solidarities must, of course, be horizontal and constantly guard against control by any one community, collective, or language. The national conventions constituted by the many communities of Assam can come together to take the lead in this process. They can imagine new solidarities or fall back upon existing interethnic identities, redefining them while interrogating inherent power differentials.

### ***Individual and Collective***

These new solidarities must be founded upon a new rhetoric and a new language of inclusion. This language will shape our conversations around historical truths and traumas, reparation and justice, inclusion and future directions. Chapter 3 discussed in some detail how, in Assam's long pre-colonial history, Axamiyā developed as an interethnic identity transcending “the perimeters of a particular ethnic tradition” and “embracing and incorporating seemingly divergent ethnic elements” into its unique worldview (Kim, 2006, 293). The Axamiyā language also, similarly, developed synergistically. Deriving largely from developments in medieval Assam's Xankari literature, the Axamiyā language also incorporates Islamic, especially Persian, influences; additionally, its vocabulary, idioms, and syntax also borrow from Bodo and other indigenous languages (Roychoudhury, 1998). Against this backdrop, fears of losing the language to the language of other communities – notably the migrants – should be critically examined. Such critical analysis must be juxtaposed with collective reflections on the efforts undertaken – or not – by the Axamiyā community to strengthen its language to accommodate and meet the demands of emergent ideas and global conversations in an increasingly connected and constantly changeable world.

In these conversations, the rhetoric we use will be of utmost importance. Rather than traditional rhetoric where the power rests with the rhetor, I suggest practicing invitational rhetoric which is based on the feminist principles of respect and equality, where the rhetor does not try to change and, therefore, dominate the listener by imposing their perspective on them; rather, they offer their perspective and invite the listener to consider it (Foss and Griffin, 1995). In Assam, where hegemonic masculinity and machismo are deeply entrenched in overwhelmingly patriarchal structures, it is always a power struggle between the speaker and the spoken to/at. Instead, the marginalized constituents must all be willing to invite perspectives from each other and listen more. Creating conditions for more voices to be heard with honor and dignity is necessary for peace to emerge as a way of doing and living. The political rhetoric, then, has to change: after all, “rhetoric is central to politics, even when politics takes the form of war” (Krebs and Jackson, 2007, 36).

Because it is so powerful, rhetoric can also be a tool for reconciliation and peacebuilding. For the people of Assam to move out of conflict, they must first start talking peace: this should be reflected in the language used in the public and scholarly conversations as well as in policy documents. “Talking peace” would involve moving away from framing peace as an absence of war and an over-reliance on ceasefire agreements and memorandums of understanding as instruments of peace. When we move away from “conflict” or “war” studies toward “peace” studies, we are already beginning to reframe the narrative (Teron, 2021). And since rhetoric teaches us to be precise and critical in the conscious use of language, the people of Assam need to be

mindful that no future policy document, peace treaty, or legislation should be allowed to use the kind of ambivalent and obfuscating language as the Assam or Bodo Accords, which exacerbated rather than resolved violent conflicts (see Chapter 3). Modifying the existing vocabulary and public (and private) language is essential.

To change the public and political rhetoric, change must first happen at the personal and interpersonal levels, where we use language reflexively and consciously. When we refer to those who took up arms to fight a necessary battle to preserve the basic human rights of their community/ies as “extremists” or “terrorists” who belong to “outfits,” we are in effect taking the focus away from the causes and agents that eroded their basic human rights in the first place. One of the challenges to making peace in conflict-habituated societies is reintegrating former rebels peacefully. This cannot be done by devaluing their cause, aspirations, or organizations. Or when we paint an entire community of human beings as “illegal,” and label them “invaders” in our everyday conversations, we perpetuate the conditions of their victimization and leave them open to persecution. Peace cannot happen unless every individual in every community is free to be their authentic self and is respected and valued for it.

### ***Local and Global***

Such changes that redefine the self/selves at the individual and collective levels have to reflexively happen and be sustained “in relation to rapidly changing circumstances of social life, on a local and global scale” (Giddens, 1991, 215). In Chapter 1, I had indicated how the endemic anti-immigrant sentiments have directed global hate against Assam as being anti-Muslim. This has the very real potential of putting the state and, consequently, the entire region – conflict-ravaged and violence-prone as it already is – on the global radical Islamist terror map. Local changes, therefore, have global imperatives. And to make these changes happen, understanding their global and transborder connections is also necessary.

Assam (and the Northeast) must now be able to step outside of the nation- and territorial-state-bound imagination that colonial and post-independence history have confined it to. In a way, the transborder networks that the many insurgent groups established and relied on to resist the Indian State have eased the region out of this imagination. After returning to Assam, founder leaders of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) recounted the travails of initially trying to cross the international border into Burma to contact rebel groups there for arms training and shelter (Chetia, 2021). And yet, there are Axamiyā villages in Burma that were settled before the British congealed the boundaries between the Burmese and Ahom kingdoms (Buragohain, 1993). Efforts are being made now at the individual and civil society levels to rekindle the near-forgotten historic and cultural ties (Konwar, 2015; Newysian Community, 2016; P. Sarma, 2016).

Reestablishing these connections at the people-to-people level have become more important since the Indian State launched its “Look East” policy in 1991. The aim of this policy was to develop economic and strategic relationships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Asian Development Bank, 2021, 1–2). In recent years, this vision has “transformed into the ‘Act East’ Policy (AEP) that focuses on the extended neighborhood in the Asia and Pacific region” (Asian Development Bank, 2021, 2). The Northeast, with its historic kinship with East and Southeast Asia and beyond, should ideally have been at the center of this new policy of the Indian State. For more than two decades after the Look East policy was formulated, however, all indications were that the developments would bypass the region which will be used only as “a transit passage” for the mainland (Mukhopadhyaya, 2017, 5).

Subsequent changes in the internal governance of neighboring countries, particularly Burma and Bangladesh, strengthened India’s bilateral relations. The relative calm of the post-insurgency period within the Northeast also helped. Assam is now being reimagined as India’s gateway to the ASEAN (Asian Development Bank, 2021). Several projects to connect the markets in the region to those of Southeast Asia via land, air, river, and road are underway. The government has also claimed success in building infrastructure-led growth and initiating policies to reshape Assam as the “expressway to do business with ASEAN” (Dwivedi, 2021). Political rhetoric and the government’s public diplomacy around this newly revived development opportunity for Assam and the Northeast are definitely intensifying.

This has enthused scholars from the region to initiate conversations around opportunities for paradiplomacy for the Northeast states to allow them, at a sub-State level, to independently pursue “political, socio-cultural and economic ambitions abroad” (O.B. Hazarika, 2021, 5). When the Covid-19 pandemic hit India, Assam used paradiplomacy to procure PPE kits directly from China (O.B. Hazarika, 2021, 72): it was among the first Indian states to do so. But for such connectivity to grow and bring about palpable change in policy and in people’s material conditions, the State must let go of its outmoded suspicion of the people of the region and the fear of Chinese domination. At the same time, the people also must be able to stake their claim more confidently and strategically.

To counter India’s fear of Chinese influence in the Northeast, for example, it has been suggested that any paradiplomacy effort in the region be “non-aligned”:

To prevent China from dominating investments or other paradiplomacy related activities in the Northeast, the states in the Northeast can opt for a multi-pronged outreach where they invite or try to attract investments from several countries including those from the United States, Japan, and other powers.

(Nayar, 2021)

Protracted conflict, prolonged alienation, and extreme dehumanization have eroded the confidence of the people. It can be bolstered by mending their fractured relationships with the transborder communities and building solidarities across borders with ethnic kin who have also been victims of violent histories in their respective nation-states. The revitalization of cultural and intellectual exchanges that is already underway can mark the beginning.

This will also give the peoples of the Northeast the opportunity to reflect on and reshape their self-identities in a globalized world. Such reinventions, however, must center their growth and wellness in relation to their indigenous and traditional worldviews. They must be able to question the attitudes, approaches, and patterns of behavior they acquired while caught in the cycle of conflict. Learned behaviors result “from an interplay between psychological and structural factors. Learned behaviors are subject to change, and change is a question of choice” (Reardon and Snaauwaert, 2015, 52). Communities in conflict must choose to abandon the outward-looking and patronage-seeking behavior discussed in the section on “Reflection”; indeed, they must be willing to question the patronage that is on offer from the power centers. Chapter 1 discussed how an increasingly benign paternalistic reimagination of Assam and the Northeast is being echoed in contemporary policy approaches undertaking the assimilation of the region into the Indian State’s changing definition of modernization and development. This definition and the proposed paradigm of development must be interrogated: notwithstanding the change in rhetoric, do they continue to commit violences toward indigenous and local beliefs, systems, and ways of life?

If village regroupings during counter-insurgency operations and conflict-induced displacement tore through the fabric of traditional community lives, forced eviction without rehabilitation (discussed in Chapter 3) continues to do so in post-insurgency times. When the evicted land is offered up for “development” to crony capitalists and “mega” developers, do the benefits trickle down to the people who lost their homes and families for such development to happen? Violence toward humans invariably accompanies violence toward the environment and vice versa. In the Act East vision for a new, connected Assam, there is a lot of emphasis on developing the energy infrastructure, particularly by continuing – and even redoubling – the extraction of oil and gas (Asian Development Bank, 2021, 80). One of the major challenges in this regard has been identified as “difficulties with obtaining environmental and forest clearances” (Asian Development Bank, 2021, 87). Meanwhile, the clearances already granted to existing oil extraction entities are not above suspicion.

A “blowout” or “uncontrolled release of oil and/or gas caused by failures in pressure control systems” in May 2020 in an Oil India Limited (OIL) well in Assam’s Tinsukia district caused a fire that raged from June to September of the year. Besides extensive loss of human life, livelihood, and property, the spill and fire caused irreparable damage to the local ecology, threatening already-endangered local species of flora and fauna (Pardikar, 2020).

Following the incident, the Wildlife Institute of India called for a reassessment of the environmental clearance granted to OIL. The subsequent report identified several gaps in managing oil spills and emergency response, besides the absence of restorative and remediation processes (*ibid.*). Earlier, in January 2020, the government passed a notification exempting oil and gas exploration projects from the “requirement of prior environmental clearance” (Menon, 2020, 4).

The people of Assam and the Northeast must join global conversations about environmentalism, alternate energies, and climate change. They can contribute to these conversations by drawing on traditional systems and practices that enabled non-confrontational coexistence with people and the planet. For one, re-energizing traditional methods of livelihood and adapting them to the current needs of the planet can help mitigate conflicts. Conflict studies scholars have established a direct link between the extraction of resources and perpetuation of violent conflicts. Business interests induce conflict and civil wars where the economy involves mostly (but not exclusively) the extraction of lootable, non-renewable resources like oil and minerals as well as readily lootable resources like drugs, and in some cases, like the teas of Assam, agricultural commodities that are marketed in a concentrated manner (Mursheed, 2008, 365–381). Assam and the Northeast should, therefore, invest in business interests based on a manufacturing economy; because economies based on “*diffuse resources*, such as those that mostly involve the *production* of renewable resources (crops)” are more likely to “militate against the persistence of civil war, given the diffused nature of production and distribution process” (*ibid.*).<sup>1</sup> With more and more agricultural land being allocated for industrial development, Assam’s primary sector of the economy, agriculture, is in decline; its contribution shrank from 47 percent in 1994 to 19.34 percent in 2017. More than 75 percent of the population, however, continue to depend directly or indirectly on agriculture (Asian Development Bank, 2021, 7). Reviving the agricultural sector must, therefore, be a priority.

Another traditional skill that the women of Assam have been revitalizing in recent years is weaving. I discussed in Chapter 4 how it has proved to be a source of livelihood generation and ethnic reconciliation. Additionally, weaving also has the potential to save the planet. Traditionally, weaving in Assam is a slow craft that uses organic cotton and silk fabrics. Women used to weave as part of their daily household chores: the clothing they wove was for the members of the family and, sometimes, for sale (Deka, 2013, 120). With escalating poverty, shrinking markets, and growing unviability of organic yarn, weavers today have taken to using synthetic threads and other non-sustainable practices. Keeping in mind the rising global demand for slow fashion (Marquis, 2021), Assam’s weavers can rewrite the narrative of violence to nature and humans alike by creating a sustainable future for both.

In an era of increasing appreciation for slowing down, whether it is in fashion or scholarship, feminists are advocating using it as resistance (Mountz et al., 2018). Assam, known for its *lahe lahe* way of life, can take the lead in

such resistance. At the same time, it can help develop a global and organic approach to living life gently in the pursuit of peace and happiness. Lahe lahe is literally translated as *slowly slowly* to emphasize the attribute of laziness and a lackadaisical attitude to life. This interpretation has its origins in colonial capitalism's construct of its Asian subjects as the "lazy natives" who did not comprehend the pursuit of wealth measured in money (Alatas, 1977, 7), and who were loath to serve the white masters as the latter expanded their labor-intensive plantation economies (Alatas, 1977, 18). As in most other Asian cultures, Assam's local people were also strongly attached to their home and hearth, being subsistence farmers and fishers for whom self-sufficiency was an organic way of life. This was interpreted as the racial trait of weakness, an indolence caused by climatic conditions (J. Sharma, 2011, 63).

In the postcolonial imagination as well, Assam remained "the land of lahe lahe" and continues to be pejoratively referred to as such. The people of Assam internalized it as a self-stereotype. Consequently, they attribute systemic failures and gaps in governance to this endemic attitude (Bordoloi, 2020). This takes the burden away from those responsible for such lapses because the internalization makes them "view themselves as the major obstacle to their own advancement" (Horowitz, 1985, 171). Self-identifying as lahe lahe also creates fissures within the people themselves: the educated and professional elites can now shift the burden of such "unacceptable lethargy" upon those in their own community who have not "caught up" (Horowitz, 1985, 172). Thus, lazy indigenous farmers or uneducated youths averse to menial labor become responsible for the employment of "illegal" migrants by the elites in their homes and farms. Meanwhile, the mainlanders use this self-loathing to uphold their own agendas. "Lahe, Lahe land is changing and happening" tweets the chairperson of a think tank from the mainland after publishing a "first hand ground report" about the right-wing government's successes in Assam (Kochhar, 2021). Or a woman's health activist and former supermodel pronounces that

Assam is known as the land of *lahe lahe* but not everybody is *lahe lahe*. There are people who are not *lahe lahe* and we, now, get that under them, under the banner of Pinkathon, they start inspiring all the *lahe lahe* people by their example.

(Nongrum, 2019)

Lahe lahe, however, also translates as *unhurriedly* or *gently* (Hall, 2002, 171). It is what we need to cultivate intrinsically at a time when everyday people are facing burnout from their fast-paced professional lives and travelling in search of a "laid-back atmosphere" (Wilson, 2013, 49). Entire industries, such as the hospitality and tourism industries worldwide, are thriving today on selling relaxing breaks to laid-back destinations (FTLO, 2021). Being and doing lahe lahe could help us rethink our fast-paced lives that are severing our ties with the planet and its people and alienating us from happiness and

inner peace. Assam's neighboring country, Bhutan, pioneered the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) which advocates that "sustainable development should take a holistic approach towards notions of progress and give equal importance to non-economic aspects of wellbeing" (United Nations, n.d.).<sup>2</sup> Lahe lahe as a way of life also prizes contentment and happiness in little things.

Despite the years of conflict and the attendant fear, hatred, and violence, it still makes itself manifest in seemingly insignificant ways: such as a poet-insurgent leaving the life of violence behind because a counter-insurgency operative offers to publish his book of poetry if he surrendered (field interviews). Often, of course, such simplicity is interpreted as "naivete" and "lack of ambition" and weaponized against the people. I propose, however, that the people of Assam should now consciously cultivate the lahe lahe way of life through critical thought and reflection to turn their conflict narrative around and write a future characterized by organic peace and quiet happiness. Their resilience in enduring the conflict years and surviving the prolonged political and social chaos around them owes, in no small measure, to this slow-paced, laid-back lifestyle that is non-confrontational but, at the same time, uncompromising in its need for self-contentment. They can also then introduce and advance lahe lahe as the placid, unruffled approach to life and living that is exactly what the world at large needs as it heads breakneck into an uncertain future riding on an ailing planet.

## **Interrogation**

As the conflict-habituated people reflect critically on the way forward, more such pathways will be revealed for them to creatively emerge from intractable conflicts and attendant violent habits. They must only be willing to look inward and analyze their positionalities while analyzing their complicities in and contributions to perpetuating hegemonic masculinities that feed violent systems and structures. To creatively design peaceful futures, they must also situate themselves in engendered histories. This will allow them to be consciously aware and constantly suspicious of the operations of power and their ability to silence, oppress, other, and commit injustices against vulnerable constituencies. Subsequently, based on this awareness, they must develop new infrastructures for peace that are drawn organically from within the community. These infrastructures must also be subjected to constant interrogation for their ability to accommodate differences, new voices, and more effective modes of fighting injustices.

To that end, the communities must begin by seeking out the obstacles to changemaking that have entrenched themselves in society. They must question why the current efforts and strategies – however feeble and few – to counter these obstacles have failed to break through. The answers to these questions might illuminate new pathways and advance alternate means and methods. As discussed earlier, there appears to be a growing desire for making peace

mutually in Assam's fragmented society. Public conversations should now increasingly highlight this desire for change. They should also focus on the positive transformations that have taken place in the course of the conflict years, albeit without trivializing or eliding the immense human, social, and cultural costs of those years.

Chapters 1 and 4 discussed the positive transformations that are visible in Assam's society as a direct outcome of conflict – from ethnic reconciliation in everyday interactions to local entrepreneurial developments to the growth of several subcultures of peace. Reframing existing approaches to conflict can thus have a salutary effect on the project for building organic peace. There is a lot to be said about the interrelationship between positivity and peace: peace innovation scholars have established the importance of creating “peace through positive actions and interactions” (Selamaj, 2020). Besides, conflict is not always a bad thing; it gives multiethnic societies an opportunity to create “constructive change processes that reduce violence” and to address the inequities and injustices in “direct interaction and social structures” so that they can positively “respond to real-life problems in human relationships” (Lederach, 2014, 17).

Retelling the conflict and peace narratives in this way, however, is not merely a means of inculcating a rhetoric of peace and positivity in conflict societies. Doing this definitely inspires an organic desire for further positive changes that have the potential for making peace, rather than conflict, a way of life. I also emphasize the need to focus on the positive developments in a strategic sense, especially in the current climate of fear prevailing in the conflict zone, a fear that comes from the State's increasing efforts at controlling individual minds and public discourse. All over India today, the State's institutions and agents are being molded more and more as instruments to impose on the diverse peoples of the country the idea of a majoritarian nation as espoused by the ruling party (Sampath, 2016). Punitive measures – including the invocation of colonial-era laws – are taken against writers, journalists, and private citizens for asking questions or making innocuous social media posts (A.N. Dutta, 2021; *The Wire*, 2021). The fear of being booked on sedition charges or arrested in the name of national security silences voices of reason.

In Assam, where the party ruling the state is the same as that in power at the national level, this fear just builds on the already-prevailing atmosphere of terror. Additionally, entrenched media systems that are controlled by those at the centers of power, whether they are politicians or crony capitalists, often actively silence voices of dissent and/or reason (K. Saikia, 2021). Over the years of counter-insurgency operations, the State and its allies have also perfected their covert and overt tactics of intimidation, co-option, and repression.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the space for radical dissent has shrunk and nearly collapsed. In 2018, when the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) 2016 was to be tabled in the Lower House of the Indian Parliament, the people of Assam protested. The bill proposed easy citizenship for migrants on religious grounds (V. Singh, 2020). It threatened the numerically small nationalities and ethnic groups of

an already troubled periphery with further marginalization. By the time the CAB became the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in December 2019, spontaneous mass protests had taken place all over Assam and the rest of the Northeast had also joined in. And for a brief period of time, Assam had spiraled back into the Indo-Assam conflict years.

However, when the protests against the CAA intensified on the mainland in reaction against its anti-secular nature, the movement in Assam gradually died out. The State handled the periphery's political resistance the same way it always did: by flexing its military muscles and co-opting the leadership. After disconnecting mobile connectivity, imposing curfew, and killing unarmed protesters, it doled out political and financial sops to community leaders by signing an agreement here and instituting a committee there. Since citizen artists were leading the anti-CAB/CAA movement, the glitzy world of Bollywood served to distract them; for the first time in its 67-year history, Bollywood's Filmfare Awards were held outside Mumbai – in Assam (Taskin, 2020).

Asymmetric conflicts (Arreguín-Toft, 2007) are, by definition, skewed against the small peoples when they confront a big State. However, the fact that the anti-CAA movement began in Assam and assumed the intensity it did testifies to what I argued in Chapter 4: though conflict-ravaged and dehumanized, in times of collective crises, marginalized constituencies retain the power to emerge from their isolated existences to organize and mobilize against hegemonic, hypermasculinist structures. To keep this power circulating despite the real and multiple threats it faces, I suggest that in Assam, now is a time to practice cautious radicalism (Carmon, 2015). America's divided and increasingly polarized society celebrates Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg (RBG) as a radical icon who took on the forces of patriarchy, fighting for women's rights and the liberal political agenda. In pop culture, she is depicted as "an avenging angel smiting her enemies," or a warrior "hacking at injustice with a hatchet." Yet, her success as a feminist crusader lay in being "a principled but canny fighter" who had "no patience for confrontation just for the sake of it." For RBG, changemaking required avoiding wasteful emotions like "anger, resentment, envy and self-pity" and, instead, devoting one's energy to "productive endeavors" that created radical change in incremental steps (*ibid.*).

In the current post-insurgency environment of Assam, RBG's cautious radicalism can serve as an effective strategy of "thinking past instant outrage and doing sustainable work" (*ibid.*). There was a time in the periphery when its marginalized people had no alternative to armed resistance (Chetia, 2021; Bhaumik, 2021a). That inevitable – and in many ways, necessary – history of outrage has now played itself out. To move into a just, humane, and peaceful future, the people of Assam have to devise newer strategies of resistance and change. They should look back critically at their post-independence history and question their continued equation of conflict with violent changemaking. Such critical interrogation of the past must be accompanied by the conscious

cultivation of a rhetoric of peace, positivity, and inclusiveness in public discourse. When this is achieved, attitudes and behaviors that inform conflicts will sustainably change.

At the same time, because this rhetoric is not deliberately polemical nor directed at the oppressive powers, it can continue making change without inviting/allowing violent repression or political vengeance. I acknowledge that there seems to be a very thin line between practicing such cautious changemaking and abdicating dissent. But far from relinquishing the right to resist, it is the kind of noiseless resistance that strengthens, from within, the people in the margins while sustaining organic peace as its non-negotiable goal. Assam's women and East Bengali migrants have demonstrated the potential of such a non-confrontational approach. In conclusion, I am advocating that the people of Assam adopt this approach as a conscious strategy. Every now and then, we will be provoked, we will be angry. There will be times when we will be called upon to raise our voices against immediate acts of injustice and violence. And, as a conscious society, we will have to speak up, we will have to take to the streets. Our outrage may or may not bring about visible change; after all, we are up against watchful, perceptive structures and systems of oppression whose agents closely and calculatedly guard their powers, privileges, and entitlements. But, in the long run, practicing cautious radicalism will keep the resistance alive, quietly, sustainedly. It will see us through to a peaceful future where our humanity remains intact. We will grow toward that future, lahe lahe.

## Notes

- 1 A similar blueprint was developed for an independent Assam by economist and political thinker P.K. Das: he advocated for the people to take control over their own natural and economic resources, where the Indian State was currently drawing out Assam's resources in the form of raw materials. His vision was for a manufacturing economy in Assam which sold its products in international markets to sustain its economy (P.K. Das, 1995, 74).
- 2 The key indicators of GNH inform and are informed by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Thinley and Hartz-Karp, 2019).
- 3 For a detailed discussion of the covert and overt counter-insurgency policies of the Indian State in Assam, see Goswami, 2014, Chaps. 6 and 7.

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